

Keynote Address

**Dr Surin Pitsuwan, Secretary-General of ASEAN,
at the Launching Ceremony of
the ASEAN Secretariat – The Nippon Foundation Project
on Leprosy and Human Dignity**

ASEAN Secretariat, 15 June 2009



Your Excellency Mr Yohei Sasakawa, Chairman of The Nippon Foundation, the World Health Organization Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination, and Japan's Ambassador for the Human Rights of People Affected by Leprosy,

Excellencies, the Permanent Representatives to ASEAN,

Excellencies, the Ambassadors to ASEAN and Indonesia,

Senior officials from the Ministry of Social Welfare and the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Indonesia,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

On 27 June 2008, the ASEAN Secretariat and The Nippon Foundation signed a Memorandum of Agreement to cooperate on the implementation of five regional projects throughout the ASEAN Member States. This is the first time that The Nippon Foundation offered a grant to and will be implementing a project with a regional, inter-governmental organisation like ASEAN.

The agreement will support the building of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community by 2015 and highlight the need for further human development and higher quality of lives for all ASEAN citizens.

The areas of cooperation under the Memorandum of Agreement, besides the leprosy project, include the promotion of traditional medicine in primary health care, programmes to empower persons with disabilities, maritime civilian safety in the region and capacity building within the ASEAN Secretariat.

One of these projects is the reason why we have gathered here this morning: we will launch the first programme and this is the Project on Leprosy and Human Dignity.

Let me at the outset say that The Nippon Foundation has a long and commendable track record of understanding this very important human problem of human dignity brought about by this disease that may have found a cure, but the stigma is still attached to the people affected.

By one man's effort, Mr Yohei Sasakawa, this issue has been brought to the attention of the global community. The global community is responding and the ASEAN Secretariat is honoured to be a part of that network of campaign for human dignity.

Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

According to the 2007 figures released by the WHO, Southeast Asia reported the largest decrease in annual new case detection, dropping from under 700,000 in 1998 to approximately 170,000 in 2007. This is a great achievement indeed.

According to the WHO report entitled "Leprosy not to be a Neglected Tropical Disease", of the ASEAN Member States, Indonesia has the largest number of the ASEAN states of new cases detected. This is most likely due to its position as the largest country in the region.

Indonesia has had significant success in curing nearly 400,000 patients since the introduction of Multi Drug Therapy treatment in the early 1990s. This represented a nearly 80% reduction in the number of patients receiving the treatment for leprosy.

Today, the figures in the ASEAN region are demonstrably lower than in the past: there were approximately 25,000 new cases detected in the ASEAN Member States in 2007.

We infer from these figures that the health and medication component of leprosy treatment can be successful. Well-planned public health activities with substantial investment in purchasing and distributing the right kind of drug therapy can be very effective in reducing leprosy as a public health problem, and reducing the rate of leprosy to less than 1 per 10,000 in the general population.

And as I mentioned earlier, the problem is not just in finding a cure for the disease, but also in paving the way to reintegrate the people suffering from this disease back into our community and society, on the basis of our care and compassion, so they can live dignified lives.

The ASEAN Secretariat – The Nippon Foundation Project for Leprosy and Human Dignity represents a new approach to cooperation in ASEAN. First, it is regional in its approach. This project starts in Indonesia and from the experience gained it will be extended to the rest of the region. Secondly, we will emphasise collaboration among governments, business and civil society. Thirdly, we hope to draw upon the global experiences of The Nippon Foundation to deal with the issue of social discrimination.

With increased public knowledge about the benefits of early detection and advanced Multi Drug Therapy treatment, we can collectively reduce the burden of leprosy as a public health problem.

The first phase of the project will focus on Indonesia and last approximately one year. After this first year we will be able to judge the project's success and its potential shortcomings, and potentially expand the project to other ASEAN Member States.

Potential activities for the project will include capacity-building workshops and seminars for people affected by leprosy and their families. The project will also educate the general public on common questions and myths regarding the disease to alleviate the stigmatisation of people affected by leprosy.

ASEAN aspires to be a caring and compassionate society and we aspire to establish the ASEAN Community by 2015. Therefore, we cannot leave any issue of this major proportion undetected. This is to show to the world that we care and we can address the issue. This is also to show to the world that we have friends and people of goodwill who want to help us to achieve that community of caring and sharing societies.

I hope that this new beginning in trying to address social issues like this will be a permanent feature of the ASEAN Secretariat and we will draw support, cooperation and attention from people of goodwill and the expertise and experiences from organisations to help us in the pursuit of the promotion of human dignity and human capacity.

Last but not least, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Mr Yohei Sasakawa. This is the beginning of a long period of cooperation. I would also like to thank all the dignitaries here: the Permanent Representatives to ASEAN and the Ambassadors to ASEAN and Indonesia. Thank you to all the representatives from the Government of Indonesia and the WHO. And, thank you to the members of the public.

Let us hope that this is a worthwhile undertaking and that it will bear fruits for the ASEAN Community, for all of us and for our people.

Thank you very much.