

PRESS RELEASE

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COVID-19 devastates leprosy community Massive suffering from “corona tsunami”

Prakasam, Andhra Pradesh, India 21 May 2021: SFLG reports devastating effects of COVID-19 from the St. Anthony's Leprosy Rehabilitation Centre, in India.

India is being savaged by the COVID-19 Corona virus. Cases are escalating faster than anywhere else in the world. In the past 24 hours, more than 4,000 people have died and over 500,000 new cases have been reported. Hospitals are overwhelmed and have run out of oxygen. People are dying without receiving the treatment they needed. COVID-19 has hit India with a ferocity not seen before.

The staff at St Anthony's Leprosy Rehabilitation Centre are only too aware of the effect that COVID-19 might have on the health of people affected by leprosy and all who live in the community.

“I am so sorry to let you know about the Corona *tsunami* we are experiencing,” said Father Innaiah Govindu, Superintendent at St Anthony's, his voice filled with anguish. “The outbreak of the virus has spread everywhere and is causing enormous destruction to human lives. Day by day the situation is getting out of control and mass deaths are taking place due to lack of medical aid, oxygen, beds in the hospitals. We can hear people groaning and patients gasping for breath in and outside of hospitals. Patients are thronging, but the situation is helpless. Life has been paralysed everywhere.”

“Our leprosy community residents, too, are affected with COVID-19. I have kept them under home quarantine and treating them as best we can,” said Father Innaiah. “When normal patients are struggling for a place in the hospitals, it's almost pointless to mention the plight of these vulnerable and neglected people with leprosy. Right now, we are in the grip of fear and danger and don't know what our destiny will be.”

“After distributing medicines and conducting funerals, I have tested positive for COVID-19 myself, said Father Innaiah. “With great difficulty, I managed to get hold of two doses of *remdesivir* and I am recovering. However, I need to do more tests and continue with the medication. There is a high demand for medicines and sometimes we are forced to buy from middlemen for a higher price,” he added.

“Day by day new variant cases like *black fungus* are breaking-out and devastating the people.”

“Many people including 140 priests all over India have lost their lives just within a span of 20 days in May 2021 due to COVID-19 and numerous people are suffering. Many young priests between 35 to 40 years of age have lost their precious lives.”

“As the world is suffering from the effects of COVID-19, it is difficult to appreciate that there is another terrible disease out there,” said SFLG’s Chief Executive Officer, Clare McIntosh. “It’s leprosy and while its existence is well known from bible, Egyptian papyri, roman herbals and medieval manuscripts, its cause was not discovered until 1873 and a cure, as recently as 1980s.”

“My great concern is that people with leprosy may not be getting their core leprosy treatment as healthcare providers prioritise COVID-19 above all else. It is crucial that people with leprosy receive MDT otherwise there is a risk that they may develop terrible disabilities.”

“This is a desperate situation for people with leprosy in India and throughout the world,” Clare continued. “The absence of antiviral drugs and the speed of COVID-19 transmission have had a terrible impact on public health systems, leading to the total collapse of many national and local healthcare services. Only time will tell how or if people with leprosy survive the COVID-19 pandemic.”

At present, St Anthony’s is home to 46 leprosy patients: 26 women and 20 men. In addition, there are 19 children whose parents are leprosy affected (seven primary school children, eight secondary school children and four college students) and five married couples. The total number being supported by St Anthony’s is 75.

St. Anthony's mission is to restore human dignity and take care of people affected by leprosy and their dependents, who have been neglected and discriminated by their families and society an account of leprosy. The centre provides shelter, food, medical aid, clothing, shoes, and education for their children.

India is home to an estimated 1,000 leprosy communities or centres (once called leprosy colonies) where thousands of people live out their lives with the effects of this devastating disease. Most leprosy centres are remote because they are distanced from society due to fears of contagion. Their very survival often depends on the kindness of strangers.

For more information about leprosy please visit <https://www.stfrancisleprosy.org/> or to speak to SFLG’s Chief Executive Officer, Clare McIntosh, please contact:

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About St Francis Leprosy Guild “SFLG”

St Francis Leprosy Guild is a UK based charity whose mission is to end leprosy. SFLG funds research projects, hospitals, and rehabilitation centres as well as active case finding projects to diagnose leprosy before it causes disability.

What is leprosy?

Leprosy (also known as Hansen’s disease) is a chronic disease caused by the bacillus *Mycobacterium leprae*. It affects the skin, the upper respiratory tract and peripheral nerves in the hands and feet, and the eyes.

How is it transmitted?

It is thought that leprosy is transmitted via droplets from the nose.

How is leprosy diagnosed?

Leprosy is difficult to diagnose at its early stages, but it often presents as numb patches on the skin. Currently, the most reliable method to diagnose leprosy, is a slit-skin-smear test in the laboratory.

Leprosy may incubate for up to twenty years before presenting with any signs. If leprosy remains undiagnosed like this, the person affected may unwillingly transmit it throughout a community. However, within a short period of receiving multidrug therapy, a person affected by leprosy will no- longer be infectious. If leprosy is diagnosed in its early stages, it can be treated readily, and it will not cause disabilities. Preventing disabilities from developing means people with leprosy are less likely to suffer from the stigma and discrimination that can destroy their lives and livelihoods.

How infectious is leprosy?

95% of most populations have a natural immunity to leprosy. The remaining 5% become vulnerable, mainly through poor nutrition, poor living conditions, lack of hygiene and a weakened immune system. Leprosy is not hereditary.

Why are people with leprosy often so disfigured?

People with leprosy lose all feeling in the affected areas and as a result, there is diminished awareness of harm from trauma or heat. Without treatment, the lack of sensation can lead to permanent damage to skin, nerves, limbs, and eyes. It can also lead to the development of reoccurring, hard-to- treat ulcers.

Is there a cure?

Leprosy can be cured using multidrug therapy (MDT), available at no cost to patients from the World Health Organization. If MDT is taken in the early stages of the disease, permanent damage to nerves is completely avoided.

The latest WHO statistics revealed that in 2019 there were 202,185 new cases of leprosy diagnosed. Of concern and indicating ongoing transmission, the number of children newly detected was nearly 15,000.

However, these statistics do not account for those people who have leprosy with no symptoms or, who are not diagnosed and are unwittingly transmitting it to their communities. In addition, the statistics do not include those individuals who have been treated for leprosy, but whose disabilities, caused by leprosy need ongoing healthcare needs, or those who are subject to leprosy stigma and discrimination.

There are 23 WHO global priority countries for leprosy, where 95.9% of the global total of people detected with leprosy are found. The highest number of people newly detected with leprosy in 2019 live in India with 114,451, followed by Brazil with 27,863 and Indonesia with 17,439.

WHO Weekly epidemiological record, Global Leprosy Update 4 September 2020, 36, 2020, 95, 417-440
<http://www.who.int/wer>