

**PART I:
6TH REGIONAL PROGRAM MANAGER'S
MEETING**

Opening & Welcome

Dr. João Batista F. Vieira, Manager, Program for Endemic Diseases, Secretariat for Health Surveillance (SVS)/Ministry of Health (MoH), Brazil, and Chair, Regional Program Review Group (RPRG)–Americas; Steven K. Ault, Regional Advisor, Communicable Diseases, Disease Prevention and Control (DPC/CD), Pan American Health Organization (PAHO)/World Health Organization (WHO), Washington, D.C.; Dr. Carlos Samayoá, PAHO/WHO Representative in Costa Rica

The group was welcomed to the 6th Regional Program Managers' Meeting (RPMM) for the Elimination of Lymphatic Filariasis in the Americas and provided with a brief description of the meeting agenda by Dr. Delia Villalobos; Dr. João Batista Vieira, Coordinator of the Regional Program for the Elimination of Lymphatic Filariasis (RPELF) in the Americas, and the 2005 meeting coordinator; Dr. Carlos Samayoá; and Dr. Steven Ault.

Dr. João Batista F. Vieira thanked the audience and expressed the group's appreciation to representatives from Costa Rica for hosting the meeting. He then expressed his optimism regarding the success of current and future program endeavors, citing the strong possibility of eliminating lymphatic filariasis (LF) in the Americas due to the strong health infrastructure, operational and research capacity, and active and participatory academia in the region, and confirmed the steady progress of the RPELF, noting that the program continued to expand despite adversity (e.g., civil unrest in Haiti). He stressed that although the problem of LF was well documented and mapped throughout the region there was an ongoing need to reinforce integration and collaboration within sectors and across countries to ensure the PELFs remained true and sustainable programs of elimination rather than simply programs of control. He noted the RPELF's political and economic appeal, due to the high benefit-to-cost ratio in the region, and urged all participants to continue to move forward to achieve the goals of their country programs.

Dr. Steven Ault welcomed meeting participants on behalf of Dr. Mirtha Roses, Director of PAHO and the Pan American Sanitary Bureau; Dr. John Ehrenberg, Head of the Communicable Diseases Unit for Disease Prevention and Control (DPC/CD) at PAHO in Washington, D.C.; and the Secretariat of the PELF at the World Health Organization (WHO) in Geneva. He noted that as per its mandate the RPMM would provide program managers with the opportunity to present the advances made in their national programs in order to place the issues and needs for cooperation and technical assistance in a public forum and to develop a spirit of cooperation among the members of the RPELF of the Americas, one of the few regional programs with significant cooperation and interaction between countries, including research groups.

He then acknowledged the presence of meeting participants from around the world, including Canada, three countries¹ where LF is still being transmitted (Brazil, Dominican Republic, and Guyana), and one country that had apparently achieved interruption of transmission (Costa Rica), as well as representatives from universities, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the private sector (e.g., GlaxoSmithKline [GSK]), and other partners active in regional efforts to stem the disease in the area of technical cooperation. He expressed the group's appreciation for these partnerships and credited them with contributing to the Americas' opportunity to be the first region in the world to eliminate the transmission of LF as a public health problem, hopefully before the global deadline of the year 2020. He lauded the Vice-Minister of Health for Costa Rica, Dr. Delia

¹ The country delegation from the fourth country in the region still experiencing LF transmission, Haiti, was unable to attend the meeting due to constraints caused by hurricanes in the Caribbean.

Villalobos, for her country's achievements; the PAHO/WHO representative from Costa Rica, Dr. Carlos Samayoa, for his active participation and support; and the RPRG Chair, Dr. João Batista Vieira, for coordinating and assisting in the realization of the meeting, and thanked all meeting participants for the tremendous work carried out during the past year by the MoH and program managers in each country.

Dr. Carlos Samayoa welcomed the group to Costa Rica and stressed the importance of the opportunity described by Dr. Vieira regarding the possibility of regional elimination of LF, noting that such a success would represent the third or fourth time the Americas region served as the vanguard in achieving a global public health goal by eliminating a global disease (following polio and smallpox). He noted that letters of commendation would be presented to Costa Rica, which had already achieved elimination of LF, and to representatives² of the two countries in the region that were close to reaching that goal (Trinidad & Tobago and Suriname), and said such successes exemplified the importance of cooperation among the public and private sector, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the international community in working toward a common goal. He commended one member of the private sector, GSK, for its generous donation of the medicines that had proven so essential in the eradication of LF, and reiterated the words of Dr. Vieira, the meeting chair, regarding the high level of LF knowledge (e.g., mapping of LF cases), research output (e.g., new treatments and methods of diagnosis), technical capacity, and political will in most countries in the region. He ended by expressing his support of the belief of Dr. Vieira and Dr. Ault—that the Americas region had the means to leave its mark on history by eradicating the complex and destructive problem of LF.

² The country delegations from Trinidad & Tobago and Suriname were unable to attend the meeting due to constraints caused by hurricanes in the region.



Inaugural Address

Dr. Delia Villalobos, Acting Minister of Health, Costa Rica

On behalf of the Government of Costa Rica, including the Ministry of Health (MoH, Dr. Villalobos welcomed Dr. Vieira, Dr. Steven K. Ault, Dr. Carlos Samayoa, other friends and colleagues visiting from other countries, and her fellow Costa Ricans, and wished everyone a pleasant stay. She noted Costa Rica's great natural beauty and hospitality and said she hoped the country's warmth and goodwill would compensate for the unusually rainy conditions brought on by hurricanes in the region. She urged the group to take the opportunity to become familiar with Costa Rica during their participation at both the RPMM and the more technically oriented RPRG meeting that would follow.

She cited WHO's 1997 declaration of elimination of LF as global public health goal at the 50th Assembly of Global Health and its optimism regarding the possibility of achieving this goal due to the relatively small number of cases registered by countries still afflicted with the disease, and noted its appeal to endemic countries to eliminate LF as a public health problem by the year 2020, adding that afflicted countries in the region hoped to comply with the goal prior to that deadline.

She explained that Costa Rica's only known, remaining endemic LF focal point was in the City of Puerto Limón, where the initial presence of human parasitosis was attributed to immigration from Jamaica starting in 1871, during the era of railway construction between Limón and the capital city of Santa Domingo. She added that the Costa Rican MoH had recently completed a mapping exercise, surveying students from all neighborhoods in the City of Puerto Limón, to document the current status of LF, and that results showed no presence of the virus or its pathogen, supporting the hypothesis that the Puerto Limón focal point was close to extinction and that there was no evidence of transmission.

She concluded her address by expressing her appreciation to the Global Alliance for the Elimination of LF (GAELF), the RPELF, and country representatives of PAHO/WHO, the executive organization and coordinator of the initiative, and said it was a pleasure, as Vice-Minister of Health of the host country, to present the inaugural speech for the meeting.

The Chair followed the words of the Vice-Minister by officially opening the two meetings and introducing the presentation by Dr. Steven Ault on meeting activities and objectives.