



AFRICAN REGION

African Programme for Onchocerciasis Control (APOC)

Programme africain de Lutte contre l'Onchocercose

01 B.P. 549, Ouagadougou 01, Burkina Faso

Tel: (226) 50 34 29 53; 50 34 29 59; 50 34 29 60; 50 34 36 45/46

Fax: (226) 50342875; 50343647

PRESS RELEASE

Development partners reaffirm commitment to eliminate River blindness from Africa

12 December 2010/Abuja, Nigeria – African health ministers and development partners have ended their meeting in Abuja, Nigeria by reaffirming their commitment to support efforts led by the World Health Organization African Programme for Onchocerciasis (River blindness) toward elimination of the disease where feasible in Africa.

The 16th session of the Joint Action Forum (JAF), the governing board of WHO/APOC, held at the Transcorp Hilton, Abuja, also approved the programme's biennial budget of **US\$36.1 million** and "additional funding" to the Plan of Action and Budget 2012 – 2015 of **US\$49.5 million**.

The meeting was declared open by Nigeria's President Goodluck Jonathan represented by Health Minister Prof Onyebuchi C. Chukwu. It was attended by health ministers or their representatives from 15 APOC participating countries, 13 donor countries/institutions, non-governmental development partners, UN agencies including UNICEF, UNDP, the World Bank, as well as the African Development Bank and the pharmaceutical company, Merck & Co Inc. Five of the 11 former Onchocerciasis Control Programme in West Africa (OCP) countries, were also represented.

At the opening ceremony on Tuesday 7, December, a Nigerian philanthropist and Grand Patron of national Non-Governmental Development Organization MITOSATH, General T.Y. Danjuma, a survivor of river blindness announced a donation of US\$1 million to the APOC trust fund.

Honourable Minister Chukwu also reaffirmed Nigeria's commitment to the fight against the disease.

The WHO/APOC programme, a broad-based public-private partnership fighting the disease using strong community involvement for over 15 years has put in place a plan for transition to complete ownership of the disease control activities by countries.

All the partners “reaffirmed their commitment to onchocerciasis control and its elimination where feasible,” with participating countries thanking the donors and appealing for “flexible donations for co-implementation of activities beyond 2015.”

Highlights of the JAF session included the presentation of gifts to APOC first female and out-going director, Dr Uche Amazigo, by Honourable Minister Chukwu, the APOC Committee of Sponsoring Agencies, and the World Bank, the fiscal agency of APOC. There were also traditional dances by APOC participating countries, drama sketches depicting the adverse effects of river blindness and a performance by an African Music icon, Onyeka Onyenu

It is the first time that Nigeria is hosting the annual JAF session. Minister Chukwu was elected chair and Kuwait, which will host the 17th session next year as vice-chair. The Abuja meeting under the theme “*Join forces to make river blindness history*” coincides with APOC’s 15th anniversary.

River blindness caused by a worm, and transmitted to humans through the bite of black flies is endemic in 30 African countries where 120 million are at risk of infection. The disease causes severe unrelenting itching and can result in blindness if untreated. It also leads to reduction in agricultural productivity of affected rural communities, impedes socio-economic development and exacerbates poverty.

For more information see WHO/APOC website @ www.who.int/apoc