

Carter Center gets \$40M to eradicate Guinea worm

January 30 2012, By GREG BLUESTEIN , Associated Press

(AP) -- The Carter Center on Monday announced it received \$40 million in donations to help fuel its mission to eradicate Guinea worm disease, a debilitating parasite that once plagued millions of people across the developing world.

The Atlanta-based center said the funding comes from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Children's Investment Fund Foundation and President Sheik Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan of the United Arab Emirates. It said the grants, along with \$31 million committed last year by the United Kingdom, will help eradicate the disease by 2015.

"Millions of people in Africa and Asia will no longer risk suffering one of the most horrific human diseases ever known thanks to the generosity and global health leadership" of the donors, said former President Jimmy Carter.

There were about 3.5 million reported cases of the disease in 20 nations when the Carter Center's eradication program began in 1986. On Monday, the center said an early tally showed that only 1,060 cases of the disease occurred worldwide in 2011.

Most of the cases occurred in the African nations of South Sudan, Mali and Ethiopia. There was also an isolated outbreak in Chad.

Guinea worm disease occurs when people drink water contaminated with worm larvae. Over a year, the worm can grow to the size of a 3-foot long

spaghetti noodle. Then they very slowly emerge through the skin, often causing searing, debilitating pain for months. The disease, however, is usually not fatal.

There is no vaccine or medicine for the parasite. Infection is prevented by filtering water and educating people how to avoid the disease.

The Carter Center has worked to stem the spread of Guinea worm in part by handing out millions of pipe filters and educating residents about the dangers of drinking tainted water. The former president has also used his political bully pulpit to encourage local politicians to devote time and resources to fighting the disease.

The center said it would use the funding to pay for programs aimed at stamping out the disease and to fund surveillance by the World Health Organization to certify eradication over three years.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation contributed \$23.3 million of Monday's pledge. Nahyan pledged \$10 million and the Children's Investment Fund Foundation gave an additional \$6.7 million.

"The last cases of any disease are the most challenging to wipe out," said Carter. "But we know that with the international community's support, Guinea worm disease soon will be relegated to the history books."

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