LCIF Shares in Celebration of River Blindness Elimination in Colombia

BOGOTÁ, Colombia, July 29, 2013 – Lions Clubs International Foundation (LCIF) Chairperson Wayne Madden joined Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter at a special ceremony to congratulate President Juan Manuel Santos and the people of Colombia for becoming the first of six countries in the Americas to eliminate river blindness. Onchocerciasis, also known as river blindness, is a parasitic disease that can cause intense itching, eyesight damage, and irreversible blindness.

“This is a momentous day for the people of Colombia, and it’s an honor to share in their celebration. Lions are committed to preserving sight and eliminating preventable blindness around the world. Colombia is proof that when compassionate, committed people work together, that goal is within our reach,” said LCIF Chairperson Wayne Madden.

To advance the river blindness campaign in the Americas, LCIF donated more than US$6.3 million to The Carter Center, which has led the campaign to wipe out the disease in Latin America.

“Colombia’s achievement demonstrates that a future free from river blindness is possible for everyone in the Americas,” said former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, founder of The Carter Center and a Lions club member.

In 1999, Lions joined The Carter Center in the fight against river blindness in Latin America, which targeted six countries in which the disease was endemic: Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico and Venezuela.

When the program was launched, an estimated 500,000 people in the Americas were at risk of river blindness in those six countries. As the result of the highly successful campaign, transmission of this once ‘neglected’ tropical disease has been broken in 96 percent of the region.

River blindness was eliminated by providing a community-wide administration of the medicine ivermectin (Mectizan®, donated by Merck) to all people in the afflicted area, followed by three years of post-treatment surveillance to determine if transmission would recur. The elimination of the disease in Colombia was verified on April 5, 2013 by the World Health Organization.

Through LCIF’s SightFirst program, which funds high-quality, sustainable projects that address the major causes of blindness and vision impairment, Lions have contributed more than US$39 million dollars to The Carter Center for onchocerciasis and trachoma projects in Latin America and Africa.

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About Lions Clubs International Foundation

Lions Clubs International Foundation (LCIF) is the charitable arm of Lions Clubs International, the world’s largest service club organization with more than 1.35 million members in 207 countries and geographical areas around the world. Established in 1968, LCIF has been preventing avoidable blindness on a global scale for more than 20 years through the SightFirst program. Lions are investing US$415 million in SightFirst and have helped to restore sight to millions worldwide. Learn more at lcif.org.

About The Carter Center

A not-for-profit, nongovernmental organization, The Carter Center has helped to improve life for people in more than 70 countries by resolving conflicts; advancing democracy, human rights, and economic opportunity; preventing diseases; and improving mental health care. The Center was founded in 1982 by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and his wife, Rosalynn, in partnership with Emory University, to advance peace and health worldwide. Learn more at CarterCenter.org.