

PRESIDENT CARTER

in Sudan: Guinea Worm's Last Frontier



As President Carter visits Sudan, the last frontier of Guinea Worm disease, Oasis interviews him and finds out more about how the Carter Center was able to eradicate a disease!

By **Rania Khalilieh**

History and Principles of the Carter Center

The center, in partnership with Emory University, was founded in 1982 by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and former Lady Rosalynn Carter with the purpose of alleviating human suffering and promoting human rights. The Center is a non-profit and non-governmental organization supported by donations from individuals, foundations and countries including: KSA, UAE, Kuwait, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the United Nations.

The Carter Center's programs include peace, democracy, human rights, and conflict resolution. Although each program deals with a different aspect of human life, they all pour into the melting pot of human rights.

Amazingly, the Carter Center has touched 70 countries worldwide. They have covered different health problems around the world including Malaria Control, River Blindness, and the Ethiopia Public Health Initiative. One of their most important achievements is the Guinea Worm Eradication Program, also known as the "fiery serpent."

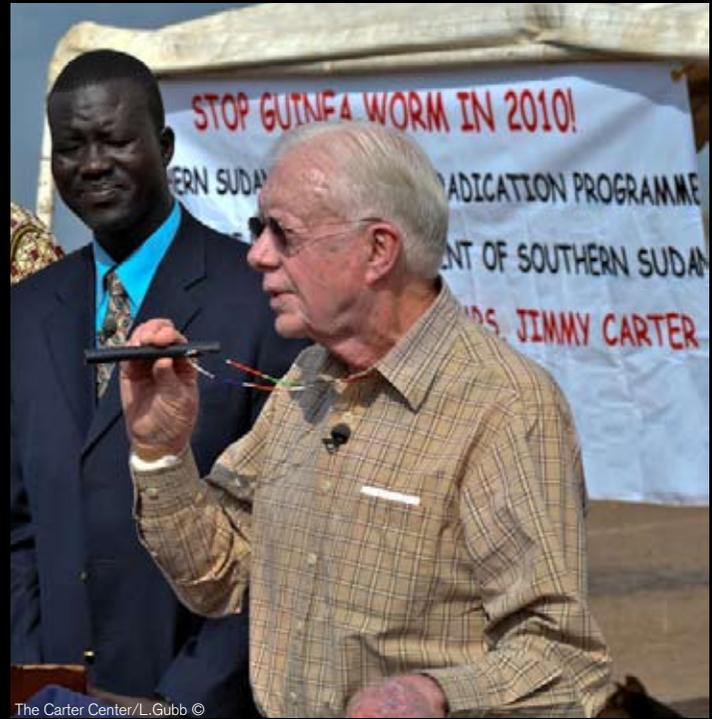
A General Overview of Guinea Worm Disease

This disease is contracted when a person drinks water contaminated with microscopic water fleas carrying infected larvae which remain inside the body for a year, becoming thread-like worms that can reach up to three-feet-long. These worms then painfully exit the body through the skin creating blisters. People infected with such a disease transfer these worms, that release hundreds of thousands of eggs, into the clean bodies of water creating an endless cycle of disease.

This serious disease cripples whole societies. The extreme poverty in which these afflicted societies live in only aggravates the situation. And, there is no treatment for this disease. When the worms start coming out of the blisters, it takes an excruciating month for it to be extracted completely from the body.



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President Carter demonstrates the use of a pipe filter to children in the Guinea worm-endemic village of Molujore, during his visit to the Southern Sudan village in February, 2010. ©

We interview President Carter and Dr. Hopkins, Vice President of Health Programs at Carter Center, about Guinea worm.

Oasis interviews President Carter

› **Guinea worm disease eradication is in its final stages thanks to The Carter Center. Why did you choose to focus on this disease in particular?**

I first encountered Guinea worm disease in a village in Ghana where nearly everywhere you looked people - women, children, the elderly - were afflicted and in severe pain, sometimes with multiple worms coming out of their bodies.

The Carter Center's programs seek to address unnecessary suffering and fill gaps where no one else is able or willing to become involved. With Guinea worm, this was certainly the case, and we've been fortunate that such simple and cost-effective interventions exist to eradicate the disease. When The Carter Center started the international eradication campaign in 1986, we found about 3.5 million cases in 23,000 villages in 20 countries in Africa and Asia.

Today, through partnerships with ministries of health in endemic countries and others, Guinea worm disease has been reduced by more than 99 percent to about 3,200 cases in only four countries—Sudan, Ghana, Mali, and Ethiopia. And we've been to every single endemic village along the way.

› **Guinea worm will soon be the second disease in human history to be eradicated. Have the countries been receptive of your efforts from the very beginning?**

I just returned from visiting a remote village in Southern Sudan called Molujore, where I spoke with a young farmer named Garbino, who was suffering with a Guinea worm emerging in his right foot. He's a peanut farmer like me, but unlike me, he endures excruciating pain when he walks, preventing him from selling his crops or goats.

In Molujore, people have intensified their efforts to eliminate Guinea worm since the Comprehensive Peace Agreement made the area accessible to health workers in 2005. With the right tools, health education, and support, Molujore has made important progress, demonstrating just how eager and dedicated this one village, and many others like it, are to building a better future.

The eradication of Guinea worm disease will be a powerful reminder to the world that we should not underestimate the true potential of poor communities to achieve remarkable things for themselves and humankind.

› **Do you believe that those communities that you have educated so far will be able to sustain this and teach it to future generations?**

In the more than 20 years we've been working on Guinea worm, we've seen 16 countries stop transmission of the disease. That's millions of people in thousands of endemic communities—many of whom never had access to health care before—who have worked incredibly hard and have been very diligent about getting rid of the "fiery serpent."

A good example of this is Nigeria, which used to be the most Guinea worm-endemic country in the world, but stopped disease transmission in 2008. We saw in Nigeria and in other previously endemic countries that people learn that tackling just one disease can dramatically improve their lives. With this experience and knowledge, they gain the confidence that they can tackle other big challenges and that those efforts can greatly improve their own lives and those of their children and grandchildren.

The response of Nigeria, as in many other formerly endemic countries, has been for the ministry of health to use and build upon the health care infrastructure created by Guinea worm disease to help address other problems. There are now organized

networks of thousands of grassroots health care volunteers who can provide health education, deliver basic treatments or preventive measures, and identify cases.

› **How can we (the international community) help finish the job with Guinea worm disease?**

The endemic communities need your support. A single outbreak in any remaining endemic country can devastate both public health and economic opportunity in areas that already exist on the edge of survival.

To date, the Guinea worm eradication campaign has raised and invested an estimated US \$225 million in African communities. Putting this amount in perspective, rice farmers in a single region in Nigeria lost US \$20 million in just one year in the mid-1990s due to an outbreak of Guinea worm disease.

I encourage anyone interested in supporting The Carter Center to visit our web site (www.cartercenter.org), where you can learn more about Guinea worm, our other health programs, and our peace work.

› **Finally, what motivates you to keep working toward goals that have been 20 years in the making, like Guinea worm disease?**

When I travel to places like Molujore, I am inspired by how people in even the most neglected circumstances are working every day to improve their own lives.

I know that they have just as good family values as I do; they are just as smart. I believe the only difference between them and me has been the different opportunities I've enjoyed. Ultimately, the work of The Carter Center is about helping people achieve better opportunities and watching hope take root where it languished before.

Oasis interviews Dr. Hopkins

The best preventative measures are achieved by improving the behavioral changes of individuals which is done through education and low-technology measures. The Carter Center provides simple filters for contaminated water along with other preventative measures including the treatment of the ponds with a safe chemical larvicide which is called ABATF. However, education is the best preventative measure, as Dr. Hopkins indicates.

› **Can we consider Guinea Worm Disease eradicated totally or how long will it need?**

Yes. Southern Sudan, not even the whole country, is the only part of the world that still has Guinea Worm.

› **How will the people of Sudan maintain their health?**

The best mean to help people of in the inflicted area of Sudan is by spreading awareness about this disease, and helping them understand the importance of proper health care. Moreover, the center works on training volunteers in those specific villages who later on train others; this dominoes effect has helped communities overcome their health struggles and has trained them to become health workeres themselves. The mission of Carter Center does not stop there; it is followed by a year of surveillance just to make sure everything is working properly, then other organizations follow this surveillance for another two years.

› **How do you personally feel about his achievement concerning Guinea Worm Disease?**

The eradication of Guinea Worm is the product of thousands of people working together. The successful outcome of this mission –the eradication of Guinea Worm Disease- is due to the effort of all the volunteers who were actively involved, and the positive outlook of the villagers. I feel proud to have been part of such a humanitarian act.

› **What message would you like to send to people throughout the world?**

The eradication of this disease is an example of what people are capable of doing when they focus on a specific target. It is not about the amount of money, nor the number of volunteers that makes a difference; it is by knowing that people's lives are being changed by what you are doing that makes all the difference. With a relatively small amount of money and a huge task we were able to reach our target.

www.cartercenter.org