



**Ecuador Becomes Second Country in the Americas to
Halt River Blindness Transmission:**

*Carter Center Hails Major Step Forward in Campaign to Rid Americas of
Parasitic Infection by 2012; Urges Intensified Efforts in the
Four Remaining Endemic Countries*

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ATLANTA... Carter Center experts congratulate the people of Ecuador for breaking transmission of the blinding parasitic disease river blindness, or onchocerciasis. Ecuador is the second nation in the Americas after Colombia (in 2008) to stop the transmission of this debilitating, yet preventable affliction on a countrywide basis, according to officials of the Ministry of Health of Ecuador and the Onchocerciasis Elimination Program in the Americas (OEPA).

"Ecuador's success is a major step toward our goal of stopping transmission of river blindness in the Western Hemisphere by 2012," said **Frank O. Richards, Jr., MD**, director of the Carter Center's River Blindness Program. "With only four countries remaining endemic, it's critical that elimination efforts and health education are intensified elsewhere in the Americas to reach the regional goal, and to avoid future suffering." The Carter Center is the sponsoring agency for the Guatemala-based OEPA, whose partnership includes the six endemic countries and thousands of community-based volunteers, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), the Pan American Health and Education Foundation (PAHEF), Merck & Co., Inc., the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and Lions Clubs International Foundation.

Onchocerciasis is a debilitating disease caused by a worm parasite (*Onchocerca volvulus*) that is spread by the bite of black flies. About 100 million persons are at risk of contracting the disease worldwide. Of these, 500,000 are in Latin America. This number is steadily decreasing in the region as now seven of the original 13 endemic areas in Latin America have interrupted transmission of the disease, largely through health education and semiannual mass distribution of ivermectin (also known as Mectizan®), donated by Merck.

Ecuador's program has a single endemic focus in the northern part of Esmeraldas Province. The Ministry of Health has been providing ivermectin treatments there since 1990. The focus includes remote riverine communities bordering the Cayapas, Santiago, and Onzole rivers where *Simulium exiguum*, a highly efficient vector of river blindness transmission is found. In 2008, a combined total of 27,372 ivermectin treatments were administered to just over 16,000 persons. Based on in-depth epidemiological studies that showed that transmission of the parasite has been stopped, Ecuador's Ministry of Health representative Dr. Caroline Chang noted that ivermectin treatments will cease but a three-year surveillance phase will begin in

2010 to ensure that infection does not reoccur in the absence of ivermectin distribution. Ultimately, elimination of the parasite must be certified by the World Health Organization, whose office in the Americas is PAHO.

Acting under a renewed [resolution by the PAHO \(Hyperlink to PDF\)](#) , OEPA seeks to stop transmission of river blindness throughout the endemic countries of Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Venezuela by 2012.

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