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Leprosy village residents rejoice at nun's return

by Anto Akkara by Catholic News Service

BANGALORE, India (CNS) -- The residents of Chickanayakanahalli village in suburban Bangalore were ecstatic when the ambulance from the Sumanahalli Society arrived. Their beloved Sister Jean was back.

Montfort Sister Jacqueline Jean McEwan stepped out and a beaming Karilingappa Sekharappa rushed forward on his crutches outmaneuvering two dozen other people with Hansen's disease, also known as leprosy, and their family members who were eagerly waiting the nun's arrival July 27.

Sekharappa, 72, embraced McEwan with the stumps of his hands, his palms lost to the disease, decades ago.

Then a group of women, several without fingers, started embracing the nun one after the other with tear-filled eyes. Healthier younger women clapped and smiled.

"This is like my dead mother coming back alive. These are tears of joy," Sekharappa told Catholic News Service, wiping his eyes with a towel.

When McEwan last saw the residents, none of them knew if she would see them again. She had been ordered by the government July 8 to abandon her ministry and leave the country within a week because her residency permit was not being renewed. No reason was given.

A desperate appeal by Claretian Father George Kannanthanam, director of the Sumanahalli leprosy home, got the deadline for McEwan's departure extended to July 25. But McEwan and others lost hope as the days passed without a response from the government.

More than 100 sisters, co-workers and priests came together to bid McEwan goodbye with a Mass the day she was scheduled to depart. But an hour before McEwan was to leave for the airport, the nun received

word that the government had extended her permit for 30 days, allowing her to apply for the normal one-year extension. An official said the original order was a mistake and assured her she would be allowed to stay in India "without limit of time."

As others in the village greeted McEwan, Sekharappa recalled how he arrived in Bangalore in 1968, banished from his village near Dharwad when he was found to have contracted the dreaded disease.

"I was an orphan and beggar in Bangalore streets until I met Sister Jean in 1983," said Sekharappa, who lives in an independent house in the village, one of five such centers across greater Bangalore.

Sekharappa's home is one of 44 in the village that McEwan and her colleagues managed to secure in 2006 for people with Hansen's disease through the Indian government.

"Sister Jean has been looking after us like her children. We felt orphaned and motherless when we were told that she had to leave the country," he said.

McEwan told CNS as she traveled to the village that she was eager to be back so she could continue the work she began in 1982 when her order ran the leprosy center in Sumanahalli.

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"I just could not think of leaving my people," she said.

It's not just people with Hansen's disease that McEwan has inspired. She was credited family members of people with the disease for assuring that they receive an education and build a solid foundation for a career.

"Whatever I am today is all due to this Mother," B. Shanti, a social worker of St. John's Medical College Hospital, told CNS.

Next to Shanti was her real mother, 70-year-old Venkatalakshmi, who had lost her legs, hands and eyes to leprosy and was seated on the steps to their house in the village.

"I still remember how Sister (Jean) took me away from the leper colony and sent me to St. Teresa's school," Shanti said.

Shanti was born in a dingy leper colony in Sheshadripuram in the heart of Bangalore. But she was educated at an elite English school with the help of McEwan and a Catholic charity. She is one of hundreds of young people whose parents have Hansen's disease who have benefitted from McEwan's efforts.

"Look at all of us. Do we look like children of lepers?" asked M. Govindaswamy, 38, another school graduate.

"If Sister Jean had not been there, we would have been drunkards, drug peddlers and rowdies," Govindaswamy said.

Although some of the elders with the disease still venture into downtown Bangalore to beg for money, their children and grandchildren lead normal lives attending even elite schools along with other children with the support of the network McEwan has built.

Even so, McEwan finds that children and grandchildren of people with Hansen's disease continue to be marginalized in Indian society.

"The educated people are the biggest disappointment in my work as they still stigmatize the people with leprosy," she said. "They are still scared about it."

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