

Nigeria is in the homestretch. Last year, it reported only 121 new cases, down from estimates of 650,000 two decades ago.

Dr. Ruiz-Tiben has been fighting it for 22 years. And for all the success, he groans, "sometimes it's like dragging a dead elephant through a swamp by its tail."

A Pond's Dangers

In 2001, Jacob Ogebe, a field officer for the Carter Center Guinea Worm Eradication Program, was trying to track down every pond in the area surrounding Ogi. He treated each with Abate, a mild pesticide that left the water potable, but killed the microscopic fleas that carry Guinea worm.

But slowly, he realized that Ogi's villagers were misleading him. He heard rumors of a sacred pond, but no one would take him to it. "They kept leading me to other places," he said. "Then one day, I was treating another pond, and I got lost and discovered it."

Though it is only a triangular puddle about 20 feet on each side in a heavily trodden grove of trees, the villagers revere it. "We have laws here, so no one dirties it," Gabriel Egba, the pond's high priest, said in an interview on its edge.

The rules are painted on a metal sign. The sacred water may not be sold or bartered. Any animal that drinks must be killed. Anyone who bathes, fishes, urinates or dips an oily pot in it is to be fined. Fines range from 35 cents to a live goat.

The pond teems with whiskery fish, turtles and snakes. More important, villagers say they believe that the souls of their ancestors also dwell in it, and Mr. Egba officiates at the sacrifices of roosters and rams for anyone wishing to talk to them.

After Mr. Ogebe found the pond, he said, villagers tried to dissuade him from treating it. "Some of them offered me money to hide it," he said. "But I told my boss at the Carter Center. Then, each time I went to the village, people followed me around. There were threats on our lives."

But by November 2003, the Carter Center's office in Jos, the regional capital, had persuaded village leaders to treat it. Nigeria's political leaders, constantly on the defensive against foreign accusations that the government here is inept or corrupt, had developed a sudden interest in the country's increasingly successful Guinea worm eradication campaign. The Carter Center's office was able to send in its biggest gun, short of a visit from Mr. Carter himself: Gen. Yakubu Gowon, who ruled Nigeria from 1966 to 1975.

For General Gowon, whom Mr. Carter had met in 1997 and asked to join his work, the Guinea worm campaign had become a point of personal pride. At 32, he took power in a coup against military rulers who had overturned Nigeria's first democratic government, and he crushed a war of secession in Biafra that cost a million lives. Now in his 70's, he is an elder statesman with his own foundation, the Gowon Center, modeled on Mr. Carter's.

He feels, he said, "a sort of guilt" that he did nothing about the disease while he was in office. "It was never reported in those days," he said. "If we had known, I would have done something about it."

On the day of his visit to Ogi, he was greeted politely beneath the village's central tree and was personally invited to pour the Abate into the pond. But when he and the other dignitaries walked the several hundred yards through tall grass to it, they found many of the village's women forming a human wall around it.

"They had colors rubbed on their faces to show resistance," like Indian war paint, Mr. Ogebe said. "They were chanting songs of their refusal."