

Acceptance speech by Dr. Akio Kanai

I am deeply honoured and grateful to have been chosen as the Nansen Refugee Award recipient for 2006. This award is testimony to the significance that the role of optometry plays in the future of refugees by improving their sight and thus empowering them to secure a “future in focus”. But I realised that by acknowledging one need, such as vision, it emphasises the many other needs remaining.

I would like to thank UNHCR. I began cooperating with them in 1984 and have since conducted more than 23 missions to help uprooted people. Without the dedicated and caring support received through our partnership with the UNHCR, the success of the Vision Aid Missions simply would not have been possible. I also believe what is often heard, that UNHCR's staff are the office's greatest resource.

Also I must thank international NGOs (non-governmental organisations) and the governments of the countries where refugee camps are located. Lastly, I thank the members of my company who have worked with me – so many others must also share this honour.

I studied optometry in the United States for seven years during which I became involved with volunteer groups and, after graduating, I remained interested in helping people in need.

During my stay in the United States, I learned that American people are very involved in volunteer work and found that they were kind, warm and wonderful. As a result, I felt I must return this kindness to others using this model and this is the reason why I started cooperating with UNHCR. But I was happy that UNHCR welcomed me as a partner.

It has been a pleasure for myself, as well as all of those who participated and were partners in the missions over the 23 years. Every mission has been so exciting and full of life-changing experiences. I must tell you it enriched my life immensely and I hope that the impact of my work has enriched others as much.

Eyesight can change one's life. My dream is that a simple pair of glasses can change the lives of refugees and internally displaced persons for the better. Eyeglasses can help people to be better included in society, and to some extent advance the Japanese concept of sustainable human security.

My desire now is to continue my work for refugees and internally displaced persons in the future. My wish is that the grant that comes with this award will be put towards improving the welfare of internally displaced persons in Azerbaijan and also for refugees in Armenia – populations with which I feel emotionally connected.

I am very grateful for this contribution and will be happy to see these funds put to good use improving the vision of people in need. I am intimate with their needs. I have always tried to use my work to promote the important concept of humanitarian and political neutrality.

This award has humbled me. The award has caused me to further reflect. And perhaps mostly, I hope this award demonstrates that sometimes small individual efforts can play an important role in the lives of refugees and internally displaced persons.

Thank you very much.