

Turning the Corner

Once a scourge of many parts of Africa, guinea worm is on the verge of eradication. Joseph Warungu speaks to former United States President Jimmy Carter about his foundation's fight to beat the disease

President Carter, first of all, how close are we to eradicating the guinea worm parasite?

Well, we started out [in 1986] with 3.5 million cases in 23,600 villages, and we have reduced the number of guinea worm cases by more than 99.9 per cent. So there are very few cases left, almost all focused in southern Sudan. We are

making good progress there and so I would say that in a couple of years, it will be eradicated in southern Sudan too.

Are there any other African countries where it remains a problem?

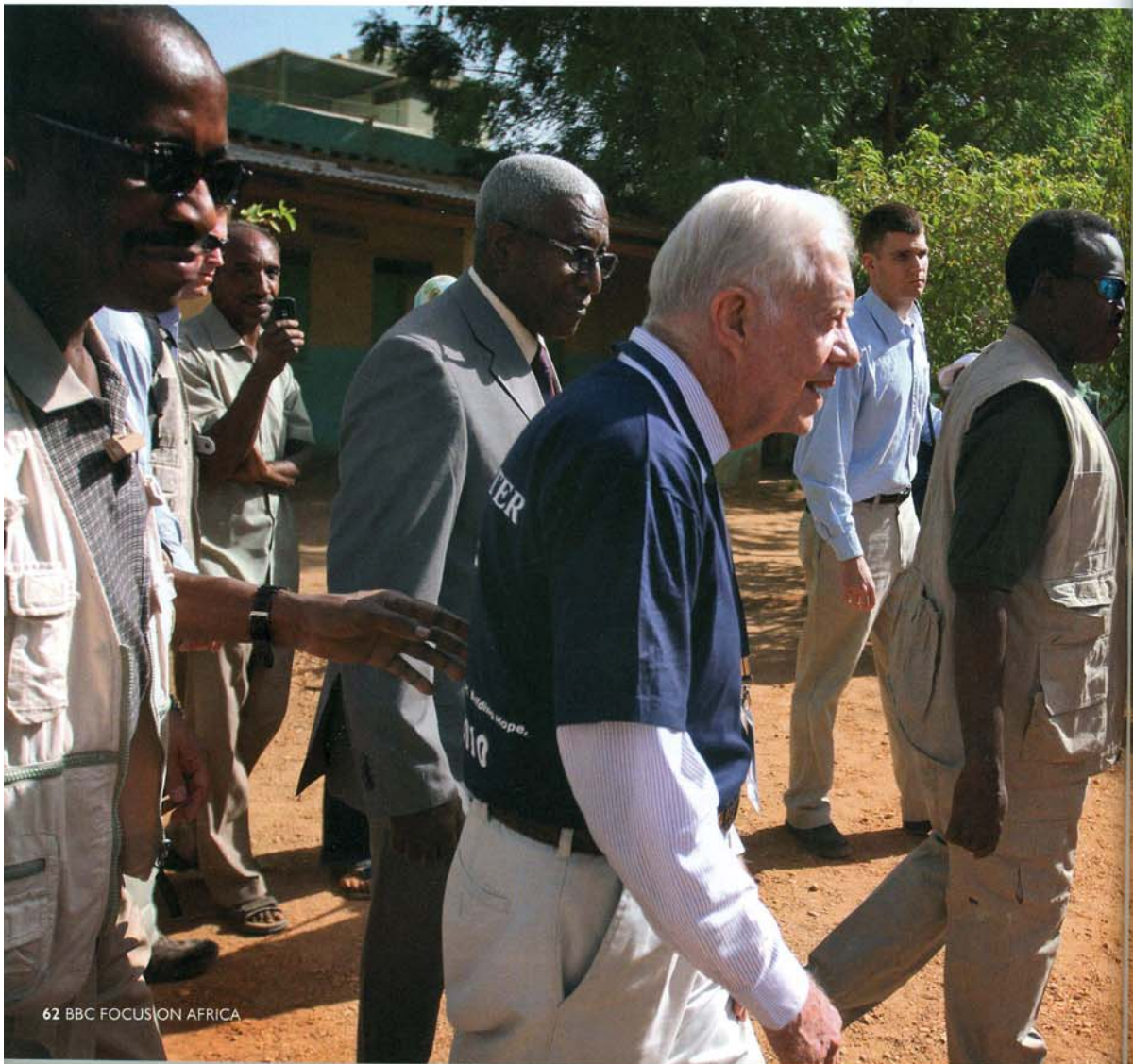
Ghana has a few cases, but we've seen a 97 per cent reduction since 2009. In one small area of Ethiopia, in a little village in

the west, we had about 20 cases last year, and now we have all of those under close observation.

Why did you decide to target the guinea worm specifically for eradication?

Well the Carter Centre undertakes problems nobody else wants to address, and guinea worm has been a horrible

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disease for thousands of years. In fact if you read the Old Testament of The Bible, guinea worm is known as a 'fiery serpent'. In fact the symbol for medical doctors – which is a staff with two serpents wrapped around it – those are actually guinea worms. It's an ancient disease, and nobody wanted to address it because it's so horrible.

How does someone become infected?

It's caused by people drinking water out of their own little pond that fills up and settles during the rainy season. The water dwindles for the rest of the year and in those ponds, which may be used only by one village, the guinea worms breed eggs. And if a person drinks water with guinea worm eggs in it, then six months later, the little tiny microscopic egg has grown into a worm about three-feet long; that is

almost a metre. It then takes about 60 days for that worm to emerge [in the process causing painful lesions on the skin]. These villages that have guinea worm are pretty much isolated from one another; one common characteristic is that they don't have any running water or deep wells.

What is unique about your effort is that there has been very little medical intervention in trying to eradicate guinea worm. Rather you have used education...

There is no medical treatment for it. In fact in ancient times – and even in the past few years – the only treatment can happen when it begins to emerge from a human body. It takes about 30 days, and the only way that local medical practitioners can treat it, is to wrap the guinea worm around a stick and put a little bit of tension on it. This helps speed up the exit from the human body.

I know that you had to intervene during the war in southern Sudan in 1995, so there was a period of ceasefire to allow your guinea worm eradication campaign to continue. Ahead of the independence referendum there, are you confident the situation will remain stable enough for you to continue your health efforts?

Yes, we are very popular with the people in northern and southern Sudan. Even though there was a terrible war going on I was able to go into Sudan and because both the northern and the southern leaders wanted to get rid of the guinea worm, they finally declared a ceasefire that lasted about eight months. They still call it a guinea worm ceasefire. This allowed us to go into the villages and war zones where people had quit firing at each other. So we were able to tell people what to do about the disease.

Some people fear there could be a return to instability or violence if the outcome of the poll is disputed or not respected; are you worried this could reverse your gains in trying to eradicate guinea worm in southern Sudan?

Well it could, you know, if the war affected a village that still has a few guinea worm cases. That would make it impossible for our people to go into the village and teach the people how to get rid of it. But we made tremendous strides in all the other African countries, many of which had civil wars going on. Even in the war zones we were able to reduce the number of guinea



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The guinea worm has to be teased out

worm cases dramatically. So I would guess that even though we might have a conflict break out in southern Sudan – and I pray that this will not happen – our effort will still be successful.

Do you feel there could be a resumption of violence?

Well it all depends. The Carter Centre has 30 full-time staff in Sudan now, preparing for the referendum in January. We will expand that greatly as the time for the referendum approaches. I will be back there again myself. I was there in April for the election, so we all are continuing our efforts, both to bring peace and also to bring an end to this disease.

“Guinea worm has been a horrible disease for many thousands of years”

Guinea worm aside, what indications are there that both parties in Sudan will accept the results of the referendum, especially

President Omar al-Bashir?

Well, obviously the southern people will accept the result. I don't think there is much doubt that the vote is going to be for an independent southern Sudan, and they are prepared for that. During the April election campaign at least Bashir made several speeches pledging that he would accept the results of the referendum, even if it meant independence. There are a lot of problems now in making preparations; up-to-date voters lists, getting the ballots made and distributed and resolving some of the key issues. But we are doing the best we can, and so is the United Nations, the African Union, the Arab countries and the European Union. All of us are working together and are determined to give Sudan the best possible chance at a successful and peaceful referendum. Nobody can guarantee the future, but we certainly have confidence that we will be successful.

Joseph Warungu is the editor-in-chief of BBC Focus on Africa magazine



Former US President Jimmy Carter (centre) is no stranger to Sudan