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2006 Nansen Refugee Award goes to Japanese man with global vision

GENEVA – The U.N. refugee agency today announced that the 2006 Nansen Refugee Award will go to Dr. Akio Kanai, a Japanese optometrist who over more than two decades has improved the quality of life of over 100,000 uprooted people around the world by testing their eyes and providing them with spectacles.

The Nansen Refugee Award Committee selected Dr. Kanai, chairman and CEO of Fuji Optical Co. Ltd., for his practical commitment to humanitarian work and dedication to easing the plight of refugees by improving their eyesight. The committee found Dr. Kanai had “rendered exceptional service to the refugee cause” and had made a huge and genuine contribution to uprooted people in human as well as financial terms. Dr. Kanai’s company is based in Japan’s northern island of Hokkaido.

The Nansen Refugee Award is given annually to individuals or organizations that have distinguished themselves in work on behalf of refugees.

“Tens of thousands of displaced people living in extremely difficult circumstances have been given a new outlook on life thanks to Dr. Kanai,” said U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres. “The gift of sight is precious. Restoring it makes a huge difference in individual lives, making learning possible for children and adults and pulling them back from the fringes of marginalisation.”

Dr. Kanai, himself forcibly displaced from the northern Pacific island of Sakhalin during the turmoil at the end of World War II, started his humanitarian optometry work in 1983 in Thailand with Indo-Chinese refugees, many of whom had lost or broken their glasses while fleeing. Many were undergoing courses ahead of being resettled to the United States and needed glasses to study. Dr. Kanai checked the sight of the refugees, and in doing so, started a long engagement with refugee work.

He began cooperating with UNHCR in 1984, and has since conducted more than 24 missions to help uprooted people in Nepal, Thailand, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. He has donated over 108,200 pairs of glasses, provided optometry equipment, made cash grants and trained local medical staff. Fuji Optical Co. Ltd. is UNHCR’s longest-serving corporate partner.

Dr. Kanai’s family and his staff are also involved in Fuji Optical’s Vision Aid missions. Some 70 employees have taken part in the aid missions, using their holidays to work in refugee camps.

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The Nansen Refugee Award, created in 1954, is named after Fridtjof Nansen, the celebrated Norwegian polar explorer and the world's first international refugee official. Previous recipients include Eleanor Roosevelt, Médecins sans Frontières, Queen Juliana of the Netherlands and Graça Machel. Last year, the award went to Margarita Barankitse, also known as the 'Angel of Burundi,' in recognition of her work with separated children whose lives have been devastated by war and the scourge of HIV/AIDS.

The award, which includes a US\$100,000 grant from Norway and Switzerland for a refugee-related project of the winner's choice, is scheduled to be officially presented at a ceremony in Geneva in early October at the annual gathering of UNHCR's governing Executive Committee.

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