The ‘Kissing Bug’

When Charles Darwin launched the science of evolution following his famous global voyage on the ship HMS Beagle in the 1830s one unwelcome species he carried back with him to England was a parasite known as trypanosoma cruzi. These blood sucking triatomine insects cause chagas disease, sometimes known euphemistically as the ‘kissing bug’ because of its method of transmission. But despite that benign designation, it has caused widespread death and destruction through South and Central America for centuries.

Darwin reputedly was a notable victim but it has only been in the last few decades that concerted efforts have been made to combat the disease which is endemic in 21 Central and South American countries.

Until recently as many as 50,000 mainly poor, rural people were dying each year, the number of new victims increased by 70,000 annually and the economic costs to the region were counted in billions of dollars.

JICA, working with the World Health Organization (WHO), the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), national governments and local communities, has helped engineer a major turnaround in the battle against a disease which is five times more harmful even than malaria in affected areas.

From 1991 through 2014 the Japanese development agency allocated a total of 2.26 billion yen to help Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Panama in a variety of activities. They include conducting initial surveys on the scope of the problem, dispatching dozens of long-term and short-term experts and volunteers to the region, training national and community officials, financing such practical projects as widespread insect extermination operations and education awareness campaigns and establishing a surveillance system to prevent new outbreaks of the disease.

The results have been encouraging in the fight against a disease which was largely ignored for decades by local and international organizations and not even known by its victims.

There are an estimated 10 million people infected by chagas worldwide and an additional 25 million people ‘at risk’.

But significantly the anti-chagas campaign is now well organized and coordinated and the number of new cases each year has dropped from around 700,000 to some 41,000 and the number of deaths from as many as 50,000 to around 10,000.