

# Vietnam's Agent Orange victims call for solidarity

Saturday 8 October 2005, by [CHENG Eva](#) (Date first published: 28 September 2005).

## Contents

- [Deadly by design](#)
- [Health nightmare](#)

Even though the Vietnam War ended 30 years ago, the US's saturation chemical bombing is still wreaking havoc on millions, including the newly born - making them third-generation victims. Nobody knows when the congenital deformities, one of many horrific health consequences of the toxic chemicals, will end.

Class-one human carcinogen dioxin was the most lethal poison left by the 80 million litres of herbicides/defoliants - more than half of which were nicknamed Agent Orange - that the US military sprayed or dumped regularly in central and southern Vietnam for 10 years until 1971. The defoliants were intended to destroy the Vietnamese liberation fighters' forest cover.

Wayne Dwernychuk of Canada's Hatfield Consultants, which conducted a seven-year study on Agent Orange, said in 2003 that the equivalent of 600 kilograms of pure dioxin was sprayed or spilled in Vietnam during the war, rather than the widely reported 170 kilograms.

## Deadly by design

Washington claimed it didn't know the defoliants were so toxic. But US military scientist James Clary smashed this claim in a 1988 letter to a member of US Congress: "When we initiated the herbicide programme in the 1960s, we were aware of the potential for damage due to dioxin contamination in the herbicide. We were even aware that the military formulation had a higher dioxin concentration than the civilian version."

Dioxin isn't diluted by water and is chemically stable so it doesn't easily decompose. As a result, it still exists in concentrated forms today, infiltrating the ecosystems and food chains in many parts of Vietnam. This is how the deadly chemical continues to claim its new prey - people who live off the land and water systems contaminated by it. And the dioxin in their blood gets passed on to their offspring, including through breast milk.

There are about 50 especially contaminated "hot spots", many of which were US military bases. According to declassified US defence department documents, on March 1, 1970, 7500 gallons of Agent Orange were spilled at Bien Hoa, home of a US base. Similar spills and dumping of aborted Agent Orange spray-runs were common. The US also sprayed Agent Purple (another chemical with even higher dioxin levels), though in smaller quantities.

The March 29, 2003, British Guardian reported that US dioxin expert Arnold Schechter found that soil samples from Bien Hoa contained dioxin levels 180 million times above the safe level set by the US Environmental Protection Agency. According to the recently published Stories of Agent Orange

Victims in Vietnam, recent blood samples from Bien Hoa showed dioxin levels of up to 271 parts per trillion (ppt) - as opposed to 2 ppt in samples from Hanoi (which wasn't attacked with Agent Orange). On June 24, 2002, the US periodical Mother Jones reported that dioxin levels in Bien Hoa blood samples were as high as 413 ppt.

Many impoverished Vietnamese, including many of the country's highland-occupying ethnic minorities, still eke a living out of, or near, these dioxin-contaminated regions.

Decontamination isn't an easy option, for humans nor the soil. The Guardian quoted a World Health Organisation warning that stated: "Once TCCD [dioxin] has entered the body it is there to stay due to its uncanny ability to dissolve in [body] fats and its rock solid chemical stability." At Aluoi, one dioxin-contaminated hot spot, the WHO recommends decontamination by searing the land with temperatures of more than 1000oC, or encasing it in concrete before treating it chemically. Neither option would be easy for a poor, struggling country like Vietnam.

## **Health nightmare**

Meanwhile, a cocktail of health nightmares is plaguing millions of Vietnamese who, after 50 years of war, foreign invasion and embargo, have lived in peace only since 1989.

A 1983 international conference on dioxin in Ho Chi Minh City highlighted many varieties of congenital malformations that were common in Vietnam after the Vietnam War, but rare in other parts of the world: malformed nervous systems (including anencephalus or the absence of the brain - sometimes entirely); deformed (including absence of) eyes, ears and noses; facial and auricular anomalies; deformed (including absence of) limbs; conjoined twins; cleft lips and cleft palates.

Dioxin is also notorious for wrecking the human reproductive system. According to a study by Le Thi Nham Tuyet and Annika Johansson, dioxin interferes with various hormones, growth factors and enzymes. Its toxicity is more damaging in children than in adults. Around 10% of Agent Orange victims in Vietnam are children.

According to Tuyet and Johansson, other frequent health problems associated with Agent Orange in Vietnam in recent decades include spina bifida, hydrocephalus, childhood cancers, intrauterine growth retardation, miscarriages, premature births and low birth-weights.

The US veterans affairs department recognises the following "side effects" arising from Agent Orange: prostate cancer, respiratory cancers, multiple myeloma, Type 2 diabetes, Hodgkin's disease, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, soft-tissue sarcoma, chloracne, porphyria cutanea tarda, peripheral neuropathy and spina bifida.

Keen to establish a family after the war, many war-traumatised Vietnamese, especially war veterans, were shocked to give birth to seriously deformed children. Many families have multiple disabled children.

In more recent years, the Vietnamese authorities have begun to grasp the true scale and very long-term consequences of the devastation wreaked by Agent Orange. Meanwhile, the human toll arising from the growing problem is weighing down many communities. As well as the hundreds of thousands of victims who have died over the years, there are an estimated 3 million living victims. For their families, the consequences are often financial, physical and emotional exhaustion.

In response, the Vietnamese government, despite being resource-strapped, started providing financial assistance to Agent Orange victims in 2000, the Vietnam Association for the Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin's (VAVA) first vice-president Do Xuan Dien told Green Left Weekly in Hanoi in September.

The assistance was increased in July last year to between 80,000 and 170,000 dong (A\$6-\$13) per month, per individual victim. Families with multiple victims can obtain an extra A\$7 or so. However, this assistance only reaches about 300,000, or one-tenth of the estimated victims. The government also provides other care and benefits in kind.

Mass education and mobilisations have also been launched - in workplaces, trade unions, women's and youth organisations and local resident organisations throughout the country - to increase awareness of the plight of the Agent Orange victims and their need for solidarity. Do told GLW that 13 million signatures in support of those victims have been gathered so far within Vietnam. A three-kilometre solidarity walk in Da Nang City in February drew 12,000 people and raised over A\$42,000. International solidarity needed

In the 1973 Peace Accords that paved the way to end the Vietnam War, the US promised Vietnam reparations of US\$3.5 billion. So far, not a cent has been paid.

Hanoi has also demanded that Washington honour its moral responsibility towards the victims devastated by its Agent Orange attacks, and help out in decontamination. Under "sovereign immunity", the US government cannot be sued. Hanoi, therefore, seeks redress from the major chemical corporations that supplied Agent Orange and other deadly chemicals to the US military during the war. VAVA was formed in January 2004, partly to carry out this task.

According to Do, in January 2004 VAVA and three Agent Orange victims launched a test lawsuit in a US court against 37 US chemical corporations. The number of individual plaintiffs increased to 28 in September 2004, but the case was dismissed in March before any oral argumentation began. Do told GLW that VAVA and other plaintiffs planned to officially submit the appeal on September 30, expecting court sessions to begin next March.

On behalf of all Agent Orange victims in Vietnam, Dien sent a special appeal to GLW readers for solidarity actions, especially in support of the court case.

Speaking to GLW, VAVA honorary president and former vice-president of Vietnam Mme Nguyen Thi Binh called on Australia's Vietnam War veterans to lend their support. Any action or statement of solidarity clearly identifying the veterans' unique voice would be most appreciated, Do said.

Do also called for support for an international online petition in solidarity with the Agent Orange victims. Launched last year, more than 600,000 signatures have been collected. VAVA is hoping to present the petition to Washington when the 1 million mark is reached.

---

## **P.S.**

[To sign the petition, visit <<http://www.petitiononline.com/AOVN>> . To contact VAVA, email . Donations can be made to bank account: Hoi Nan nhan chat doc da cam/dioxin Viet Nam 001.1000.863681, Bank Transactions Office, Vietcombank. Please inform GLW of your solidarity actions. Australian veterans interested in further actions can email "intl dsp.org.au" or "eva greenleft.org.au".]

\* From Green Left Weekly, September 28, 2005.