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## Agent Orange in Vietnam: Recent Developments in Remediation

Matthew Palmer, Under Secretary for Political Affairs  
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Testimony before the Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and the Global Environment  
Committee on Foreign Affairs  
Washington, DC  
July 15, 2010

Chairman Faleomavaega, Ranking Member Manzullo, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify today on the topic of United States engagement with Vietnam on issues related to Agent Orange.

### Overall Relationship

It is important to place U.S.-Vietnam cooperation on the complex and challenging issues surrounding Agent Orange in the context of progress in our overall bilateral relationship. This year marks the 15th anniversary of our diplomatic relationship with Vietnam. Over this short period, U.S.-Vietnam cooperation has steadily matured into a robust bilateral relationship, characterized by mutual respect and shared interests. We continue to make progress on a growing range of issues, from trade liberalization, health and environment, to education, nuclear safety, and security. Our strong collaboration on these issues has created a positive environment that has allowed frank discussions of matters on which we do not agree, such as human rights. USAID/Vietnam works in close partnership with the Vietnamese government, and with our colleagues in the Departments of Defense and Health and Human Services, and in the Environmental Protection Agency, to implement a broad foreign assistance program. As part of that program, USAID has provided over \$330 million in the last ten years. This assistance includes development objectives, such as economic reform and good governance, as well as programs to address genuine humanitarian needs, including HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention, and aid to people with disabilities, regardless of cause.

Before I turn to our cooperation on Agent Orange, it is also important to note the significant strides we have made in addressing other war legacy issues through our joint collaboration with the Government of Vietnam. Thanks to a sustained bilateral effort, we have succeeded in recovering and accounting for the remains of 660 Americans lost during the Vietnam conflict. We also continue to make progress towards clearing unexploded ordinance. Since 1989, the United States, through the State Department, has provided over \$37 million in a broad spectrum of programs not only to locate, remove, and destroy unexploded ordnance (UXO), landmines, and other explosive materials, but also to address the effects of UXO on the health and livelihood of Vietnamese living in affected areas.

### U.S.-Vietnam Collaborative Efforts on Agent Orange

While our bilateral cooperation with the Government of Vietnam accounting for Americans missing from the war began more than 20 years ago and on UXO issues 15 years ago, cooperation on Agent Orange and its contaminant dioxin took longer to begin. However, since 2001, our two governments have worked to address potential environmental and health issues related to Agent Orange and dioxin. After several years of information sharing and capacity building in 2006, experts from the two nations attended the first meeting of the Joint Advisory

Committee on Agent Orange/dioxin (JAC). The JAC was convened to coordinate joint research and provides technical advice to policy makers to help develop environmental and health initiatives. The fifth annual JAC just concluded this month in Hanoi. I am pleased to report that in December 2009, the U.S. Government and Vietnam's Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Agent Orange, formalizing years of cooperation and marking a new level of commitment to resolving this issue. The document serves as the framework for future cooperation on environmental health and remediation research activities and ensures that U.S. activities align with Vietnamese priorities.

**Both the United States and Vietnam agree that the health of the Vietnamese people and the safety of its environment will be vital for Vietnam's future. In the spirit of humanitarian concern, we have provided more than \$46 million in assistance for all Vietnamese living with disabilities, without regard to cause, including nearly \$25 million from the Leahy War Victims Fund. We have also expanded disability assistance in the communities surrounding the Danang airport. With funding from the FY 2007 and FY 2009 appropriations, USAID is nearing the completion of the second year of separate three-year cooperative agreements with Save the Children, East Meets West Foundation, and Vietnam Assistance to the Handicapped. These organizations are providing services such as skills training, medical support, and employment assistance to people with disabilities in Danang. In addition, with Ford Foundation support, several experts from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention just completed a workshop with their Vietnamese counterparts to facilitate the early identification of children at risk for developmental disabilities and to improve birth defect and chronic disease surveillance systems. These projects aim to expand the scope of health assistance beyond support for people with disabilities toward the goal of reducing the overall disability burden in Vietnam.**

The United States also recognizes the importance of remediation at "hotspots," the former airbases where dioxin contamination exceeds international safety standards. Building on past containment efforts, we now are collaborating to eliminate the potential for dioxin exposure at the Danang airport. Our activities complement the efforts of a broad coalition: the Government of Vietnam, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the Ford Foundation, and others are committing substantial resources to dioxin remediation throughout the country. UNDP and the Government of Vietnam have just signed an agreement for \$5 million to support dioxin remediation at dioxin hotspots, with an initial focus at Bien Hoa – a project specifically promoted by UNDP to complement U.S. efforts.

### Progress at Danang

As requested by the Government of Vietnam and as reviewed scientifically by the bilateral, multi-agency Joint Advisory Committee on Agent Orange, the United States is focusing its remediation efforts on Danang airport. Though we share the desire to implement remediation as soon as possible, our over-riding goal is to complete dioxin destruction that ensures worker safety, permanently removes potential exposure to Danang residents, and fully complies with U.S. and Vietnamese law. We are moving as fast as possible to do this, but want to make sure that we pay attention to the details and get this right.

Last year we reported to this committee on the beginning stages of a remediation project the U.S. planned for Danang. I am pleased to note that we have made great progress towards our

remediation goals. Working with the Ford Foundation, the EPA and the Vietnam Academy of Science and Technology are jointly piloting innovative bioremediation technology at Danang airport. At the same time, close consultation with the Government of Vietnam and consistent with U.S. and Vietnamese legal requirements, a USAID contractor is finalizing an environmental assessment for dioxin remediation at Danang and expects to begin developing engineering and design plans for the technology selected through the assessment process in August of this year.

Vietnamese efforts to expand the Danang airport highlight the need to move as quickly as feasible. Ongoing construction has already displaced contaminated soil and sediment, posing risks to human health in the surrounding area. In consultation with central authorities and airport officials, we have developed a remediation plan that USAID estimates can be shovel-ready in early 2011, consistent with airport expansion plans, and could be completed by 2013, subject to availability of resources. The complete and permanent elimination of dioxin contamination from Danang due to Agent Orange would represent the most significant action we can take to alleviate the environmental concerns and possible health impacts at Danang and offer resolution to one of the Government of Vietnam's high priority concerns. It could also provide a model for moving ahead with remediation at other dioxin hotspots.

USAID estimates at least \$34 million in project costs is required to complete this remediation. The State Department and USAID have identified approximately \$4.9 million for this project from the FY 2010 appropriation: \$3 million in Economic Support Funds, and \$1.9 million in Development Assistance funds. Additionally, the FY 2011 budget request also includes some resources for these activities.

## Conclusion

Over the last several years, the United States has worked with Vietnam to ensure that our Agent Orange activities align with Vietnamese health and environmental objectives. This cooperation has brought us closer than ever to the permanent elimination of dioxin at Danang Airport due to Agent Orange and has allowed us to provide much-needed assistance to vulnerable populations. Agent Orange has long been a sensitive topic in U.S.-Vietnam relations, and we have had some past challenges reaching agreement on how and where to cooperate, but we are now transforming dialogue into tangible improvements in the environment and health of the people of Vietnam. The United States Government has demonstrated a firm commitment on working to find a resolution to this lingering concern and to ensuring the continued improvement of U.S.-Vietnam relations.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to appear before you today. I welcome your questions.