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Addressing the Impacts of Agent Orange

21 million gallons of defoliants and herbicides were sprayed by plane, helicopter and hand over southern Viet Nam for more than 10 years during the Vietnam War. Laos and Cambodia were also sprayed to lesser extents. Two-thirds of the defoliants and herbicides were contaminated with TCDD or dioxin. In addition, DOD used dioxin contaminated herbicides along the DMZ in Korea and performed tests of these herbicides at numerous locations throughout the US, Thailand, Puerto Rico, and New Brunswick, Canada. Communities such as Midland, MI, Nitro, WV, Newark Bay, and Gulfport, MS are still dealing with the ongoing impacts of the manufacture or storage of the toxic herbicides.

Veterans and Agent Orange

US Veterans who served in SE Asia during the Vietnam war are presumed by the Veteran's Administration to have been exposed to the toxic herbicides making them eligible for Veterans Administration benefits if they have one of the diseases or conditions associated with service in Viet Nam. Those who served along the Korean DMZ during the time of herbicide use are also eligible for benefits, as are some of those who served on the bases where testing of the herbicides took place. Veterans in Korea and Australia who served in Viet Nam also received compensation from their own governments for diseases connected to their service in Viet Nam.

US veterans' children are eligible for benefits if they suffer from Spinal Bifida. Children of female veterans are eligible for VA benefits if they suffer from one of seventeen birth defects associate with their mother's service in Viet Nam including: Cleft Lip and cleft palate, club foot, congenital heart disease, hydrocephalus, and neural-tube defects.

"Blue Water Navy" Veterans who served off the coast of Viet Nam during the war have taken the VA to court to get the same VA benefits as those who had their 'boots on the ground'. Civilian Contractors and Vietnamese-American former ARVN are also left out of any VA compensation programs.

Veterans have complained that the VA disability claims process is extremely slow, cumbersome and that it is difficult to get approval for their claims. There is a backlog at the VA of 1,000,000 claims (for all Veterans) each claim averages 182 days for a decision.

The Vietnam Veterans Association and other veterans' groups are calling for a comprehensive health study on the impacts of Agent Orange and the other toxic chemicals on veterans and their children, including supporting epidemiological studies in Viet Nam.

Viet Nam and Agent Orange

According to research by Jeanne Stellman et al of Columbia University a least 4.8 million Vietnamese civilians were living in the areas sprayed by airplane. This figure does not include the Vietnamese soldiers (on both sides of the war), Vietnamese civilians who traveled through the sprayed regions, or those that worked on the military bases which were frequently sprayed.

The Viet Nam government estimates that there are 3 million people in Viet Nam suffering from the affects of Agent Orange. The Viet Nam Red Cross estimates that 150,000 Vietnamese children are disabled due to their parent's exposure to dioxin. Women living in sprayed regions have experienced high rates of premature birth, spontaneous abortions, stillbirths, molar pregnancy, uterine cancer, and severe birth defects.

The Vietnamese government provides limited support (\$3-\$7/month) to Vietnamese who were exposed to Agent Orange and suffer birth defects or other health impacts. However, this assistance is inadequate and reaches less than half of those who are eligible.

The **10-80 Committee of the Vietnamese Ministry of Health** and the National Steering **Committee 33** have been tasked with identifying the health and environmental impacts of Agent Orange and the other toxic herbicides in Viet Nam. **The Viet Nam Association of Victims of Agent Orange** provides support service to those impacted by Agent Orange and have also filed a lawsuit in US courts against the chemical companies. The case was dismissed and the petition to hear the case was denied by the US Supreme Court.

Recent US Legislative Activites

Senator Patrick Leahy placed an earmark in the 2007 Iraq spending bill to provide \$3 million to address remediation of dioxin hot-spots in Viet Nam and to support public health programs in the surrounding communities. USAID is the implementing agency of the funding. An additional \$3 million was allocated in March 2009 in the FY2009 Omnibus bill.

Rep. Robert Wexler (D-FL-19) introduced the 'Civilian Agent Orange Act of 2007' in February 2007, the bill had 13 co-sponsors but remained in committee.

Rep. Steve Kagen (D-WI-8) introduced H.R. 6798 in August 2008 to include cancers of the gastrointestinal tract. He plans on re-introducing the bill in 2009.

Rep. Bob Filner, (D-CA-51) Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs introduced "The Agent Orange Equity Act of 2008" in July 2008 to extend benefits to the "Blue Water Navy" and other military veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange during their service outside of Viet Nam. Rep. Filner reintroduced the bill in 2009.

US Government activities regarding Agent Orange in Viet Nam

Since 1989 the US government has provided \$47 million for programs supporting the disabled in Viet Nam, much of this through the Leahy War Victims Fund to help those who were injured by explosive remnants of war. Recent US grants have helped provide training to teachers in inclusive education, build a wing to a rehabilitation hospital in Da Nang, and support a job training program for the disabled. However, most of these programs do not reach the severely disabled in Viet Nam believed to be affected by Agent Orange. In addition, US humanitarian assistance does not reach those in Viet Nam suffering from cancers and other illnesses associated with exposure to the toxic herbicides. Since normalization of relations between the US and Viet Nam the issue of Agent Orange has become one of the last stumbling blocks in addressing the legacies of the war.

In the past seven years there have been slow but steady progress to address this last “Ghost” of the war. These efforts need to be increased in order for the bi-lateral relationship to strengthen and to address the full impacts of Agent Orange/Dioxin.

2000 - Meeting between US and Vietnamese scientist held in Singapore to explore the possibility of launching a joint research program to study the human and environmental health effects of Agent Orange and other herbicides used during the Vietnam War.

2002 - US-Viet Nam conference on Human Health and Environmental Effects of Agent Orange/Dioxins held in Hanoi. An MOU on Scientific cooperation was signed.

2002-2005 - US National Institute of Environmental and Health Science (NIEHS) sends several delegations to Viet Nam and hosted Vietnamese scientists in the US to negotiate a joint research project on the possible relationship between Agent Orange and birth defects. The research project was cancelled by NIEHS when both sides were unable to reach agreement on the research protocols.

2003 - The first US-Viet Nam workshop on remediation of dioxin was held. A second workshop on remediation techniques was held in Hanoi in August 2005 co-sponsored by the US Department of Defense and the Viet Nam Ministry of Defense.

2005 - The US EPA, the Viet Nam Ministry of Defense and the Viet Nam Academy of Science and Technology (VAST) began a project to measure dioxin in soil at the Da Nang airbase, the US also donated a gas chromatograph / mass spectrometer (GC/MS) valued at \$500,000 to VAST and provided training to use the equipment. To date the US has provided \$2 million for this project. \$2.5 million from the 2007 and 2009 Congressional allocation for AO/Dioxin projects will be used to continue the work in Da Nang.

2006 - The Joint Advisory Committee on Agent Orange made up of US and Vietnamese government officials and experts held its first meeting to explore areas of scientific cooperation, technical assistance and environmental remediation of dioxin hotspots. Additional meetings were held in 2008 and 2009.

November 2006 - President Bush and Viet Nam’s President Triet declared in their Joint Statement that “further joint efforts to address the environmental contamination near former dioxin storage sites would make a valuable contribution to the continued development of their bilateral relations.”

2008 - **USAID** puts out a request for proposals for the first installment of the congressional allocation for programs to address the public health needs of those living around the Da Nang Dioxin hotspot. Three US Non-governmental organizations are awarded the funding. An Agent Orange Program Coordinator position was added to the USAID office in Hanoi.

Current Needs in Viet Nam

Health - Rehabilitation, day-care and respite centers for the disabled, home-based rehabilitation programs and support for parents/care-takers; funds for surgeries; wheelchairs; programs to train physical, occupational, and speech therapists; early detection and early intervention programs for children with birth defects; comprehensive survey of disabled in Viet Nam and their needs; the development of a birth defects registry; and early detection and treatment of cancers associated with exposure to dioxin.

Environmental - Containment and/or remediation at the three major ‘dioxin hotspots’ on the former military bases at Da Nang, Bien Hoa and Phu Cat ; additional research done on at least a dozen additional potential ‘hotspots’ of lesser severity; and reforestation and environmental remediation in the defoliated areas.

Socio-economic - Support for the poor families with disabled children or family members suffering from cancer and other illnesses who are living under the poverty line (earning less than \$20/month); income generation programs, inclusive education programs for the disabled, training of special education teachers and vocational training programs to enable the disabled to find employment.

Non-governmental activities in Viet Nam

Ford Foundation - Since 2000 has funded research to identify dioxin hotspots, funded a containment project at the Da Nang airbase, and provided grants to the NGOs to assist those believed to be disabled by Agent Orange as well as to address the environmental impacts of Agent Orange. In 2007 Ford started the Dioxin Initiative, committing \$7 million over two years to Agent Orange programs including the **US - Viet Nam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange - Dioxin** coordinated by the **Aspen Institute**. The initiative was extended until 2011.

US Fund for UNICEF - Ford provided UNICEF with a \$1 million matching fund challenge grant to launch a new program for children with disabilities in Viet Nam which UNICEF matched by \$1.3 million.

US NGOs - **The War Legacies Project, the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation, the East Meets West Foundation, The Da Nang-Quang Nam Fund, Catholic Relief Services, CHEER Viet Nam, Children of Viet Nam, the Viet Nam Assistance to the Handicap** and others have been providing rehabilitation, education, income generation and other services to the disabled in Viet Nam, including those believed to be impacted by Agent Orange. However these programs only reach a small number of those in need.

Vietnamese Organizations: **The Viet Nam Red Cross, Viet Nam Association for Victims of Agent Orange, and Office of Genetic Counseling and Disabled Children - Hue School of Medicine, the Friendship Village and Peace Villages** have provided medical care, rehabilitation, education and vocational training services to the disabled, also reaching a small percentage of those in need.