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U.S. GIVES VIETNAM \$400,000 TO PLAN CLEAN-UP OF AGENT ORANGE HOTSPOT

HANOI, Vietnam -- The U.S. government will give Vietnam \$400,000 toward cleaning up a former U.S. military base contaminated by Agent Orange, its biggest step yet toward resolving one of the most contentious legacies of the Vietnam War, the U.S. ambassador said Friday.

The money will be used to help pay for a \$1 million study on how to remove dioxin from the soil at the former U.S. base in Danang, one of three Agent Orange hotspots recognized by the U.S. government. Dioxin is a highly toxic ingredient of Agent Orange, an herbicide U.S. forces used to strip away foliage from jungles during the Vietnam War.

"I want to make clear that the United States government understands the concerns of the government of Vietnam and the Vietnamese people about the impact of dioxin on the environment and human health," U.S. Ambassador Michael Marine said.

The grant marks an important symbolic step toward resolving an issue that has long divided the two former foes, whose relationship has grown steadily closer in recent years.

Vietnam maintains that 4 million people have suffered birth defects or other health consequences from the chemical. The United States says more scientific evidence is needed to determine the link between Agent Orange and health.

During a news conference Friday, Marine stressed that the United States has spent more than \$43 million since 1988 to assist Vietnamese with disabilities, regardless of what caused their ailments. "The United States is committed to supporting the well-being of the people of Vietnam," Marine said.

Le Ke Son, the official in charge of Vietnam's Agent Orange research program, thanked the U.S. for its contribution but said millions more will be needed to pay for the damage caused by dioxin in Vietnam.

The U.S. grant is a "meaningful action" and a "progressive step," Son said. "However, we still have a long way ahead."

The Ford Foundation will provide funding for the Danang study. Given the difficulty the two sides have had dealing with the Agent Orange issue in the past, the \$400,000 grant is a "very important step," said Charles Bailey, the foundation's representative in Vietnam.

"There have been many small steps already, but this is a much bigger one," he said.

Previous efforts by the two sides to cooperate on the Agent Orange issue have ended in failure. In 2005, they scuttled a joint research project on the defoliant after failing to agree on the parameters of the study.

In 2005, a group of Vietnamese filed a lawsuit in the United States against the chemical companies that produced Agent Orange, including Dow Chemical and Monsanto, accusing them of war crimes. The judge dismissed the case, but the plaintiffs have appealed his decision.

In the early 1990s, the U.S. government approved some financial assistance for U.S. veterans believed to be suffering from dioxin side effects. But the government declared that the link between the chemical and any health effects was "presumptive," meaning that it had not been scientifically proven.