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Agent Orange: Poisoning Vietnam for Last 30 Years

By Barb Neth, Buffalo, N.Y.

Some 30 years after the U.S. military was forced to stop poisoning Vietnam with Agent Orange, three generations of Vietnamese and their country continue to experience its toxic affects. Agent Orange--so called because of the orange-striped drums it was shipped in--was a chemical defoliant that was used extensively in Vietnam from 1962 to 1970. The Pentagon named this malicious campaign "Operation Ranch Hand."

Unable to quell the Vietnamese struggle for self-determination using the Pentagon's enormous arsenal of weapons, the U.S. military sought instead to strip Vietnam of all vegetation, to deny food and cover to the Vietnamese revolutionaries. Air Force planes and U.S. soldiers on trucks, boats, and foot with hand-held sprayers pumped out clouds of lethal toxin, killing all flora in their path and creating crisscrossed patterns of thousands of intersecting swaths that blackened province after province.

All told, 11.2 million gallons of deadly poison decimated hardwood forests, dense mangrove jungles, and vast expanses of cropland throughout the southern half of Vietnam. Water supplies, the air, the soil, and crops were all contaminated with Agent Orange. It affected everyone in the areas surrounding the spraying. This meant Vietnamese combatants and non-combatants, as well as U.S. soldiers, were contaminated.

Agent Orange was a potent brew of two powerful chemicals. One chemical contained an unavoidable byproduct called 2,3,7,8-TCDD, an especially dangerous form of dioxin. Dioxin, a carcinogen, has been called the most toxic molecule ever synthesized by humans.

There is no question that the U.S. military had ample warning regarding the potential danger Agent Orange posed to human life and the environment.

Seventeen Nobel laureate scientists, the Federation of American Scientists, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science all called for a halt to the murderous campaign. They branded it "barbarous" and a dangerous precedent for chemical and biological warfare.

But the Pentagon had already tested Agent Orange's effectiveness as a herbicide in the Florida Everglades and Puerto Rico. The brass ignored the concerns and the possible danger. The generals considered the risk of poisoning "their own" soldiers and an entire country unimportant if this weapon could help achieve their ultimate objective--complete subjugation of Vietnam to U.S. corporate interests.

The chief architect of "Operation Ranch Hand", Adm. Elmo Zumwalt, even indicated in his memoirs that "knowing what I know now, I still would have ordered the defoliation to achieve the objectives it did." Zumwalt died Jan. 2 from cancer caused by exposure to Agent Orange. His son, Elmo Zumwalt Jr., an officer who was also in Vietnam, died from cancer in 1988--also caused by exposure to Agent Orange. And Zumwalt Jr.'s son was born with a severe disability--because of his father's exposure to Agent Orange.

WHY THEY SPRAYED

What "objectives" did the spraying of a deadly herbicide over half of a country achieve? It certainly didn't prevent the Vietnamese from kicking the U.S. military out of their country. Nor were U.S. soldiers' lives saved. Over 270,000 U.S. veterans and their families, have suffered disease, disability, and death because of the Pentagon's deliberate use of this lethal toxin.

What the spraying--coupled with more than a decade of Pentagon bombings and warfare--did accomplish was widespread devastation of Vietnam's environment. Millions of gallons of toxic herbicide soaked the southern half of Vietnam during the 1960s. These poisons eventually killed or injured 400,000 people, and contributed to birth defects in 500,000 children [compare that with the number of US citizens killed in the USA in terrorist attacks in the whole 20th century!].

This legacy of destruction has placed an enormous burden on the heroic revolutionary spirit of the Vietnamese people. The costs of environmental cleanup, research, and health care have meant hardship for a revolutionary Vietnam struggling to rebuild on socialist foundations. Yet despite these difficulties--and in spite of the U.S. government's continued hostility, attempts at subversion and refusal to make reparations for the damage it caused--the Vietnamese people continue to persevere.

Even the U.S. veterans the Pentagon poisoned with Agent Orange in Vietnam were only able to wrench a modicum of compensation from the U.S. government for the health problems they and their families suffered. And that was only after a long, hard, and bitter battle with the Pentagon establishment.

Only a similar struggle can force the militarists in the Pentagon to admit their culpability for the devastation wreaked on Vietnam. Such an admission would imply they should accept responsibility for all of the other destruction they have caused, and continue to cause, around the globe.

DEPLETED URANIUM

The U.S. military has littered the world with deadly chemicals, lethal land mines, and radioactive waste in the form of depleted uranium. And the generals want to be free to continue to do so at their discretion. Depleted uranium has become their favorite new poison. DU, an extremely dense metal, is a waste product created during the production of nuclear weapons. DU bullets can pierce tanks and bunkers, and tanks made from it are virtually impenetrable.

However, once DU objects are impacted they fragment, spewing radioactive particles into the air that can become lodged in human body tissue. The Pentagon used DU weapons extensively throughout Iraq and Yugoslavia. As with Agent Orange, DU demonstrates the Pentagon's blatant disregard for humanity. Also, as with Agent Orange, mass outrage and protest can prevent the U.S. military from creating another environmental disaster as it did in Vietnam.

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