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International Study Is Urged Of Agent Orange in Vietnam

By PHILIP M. BOFFEY
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Jan. 20 — The senior member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee today called for an international study of whether Agent Orange, a herbicide used to defoliate trees and kill crops in the Vietnam War, had caused harm to the Vietnamese who were exposed to it.

Representative Don Edwards, Democrat of California, who recently returned from a week in Vietnam, said an objective study conducted there could help resolve the dispute over whether the herbicide caused long-term harm to American troops. It was used to destroy vegetation that provided cover for the Vietcong.

"We can't resolve the problem here, apparently," Mr. Edwards said in a telephone interview. "I concluded that a study of what happened over there would assist greatly in the American studies of our veteran population. It just doesn't make sense not to go where the living laboratory is."

Vietnamese See a Link

Mr. Edwards said Vietnamese hospital administrators, scientists and doctors had told of health damage to women who had apparently been exposed to the herbicide M girls in jungle villages. He said he had been told there was a high rate of cancer of the uterus and of abnormal births among these women.

"Maybe Agent Orange had nothing to do with it," Mr. Edwards said, "but that should be established. An investigation should be done."

Vietnamese scientists have conducted studies concluding that birth defects and cancer appear related to Agent Orange. One group of scientists from Western and Communist bloc countries that visited Vietnam a year ago said it found the studies "suggestive" but not conclusive.

The group, of which Arthur H. Westing, an ecologist at Hampshire College in Amherst, Mass., was the co-leader, called for cooperation between Vietnamese and other scientists on the question.

Itching Skin and Sleeplessness

The Federal Government is sponsoring more than 50 studies of Agent Orange in this country. The key studies require accurate records of where people were at the time the herbicide was sprayed and of subsequent health problems. Some American scientists doubt that adequate records for such a study exist in Vietnam.

Mr. Edwards said that in visiting hospitals in both Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi he heard far fewer complaints of suffering among male Vietnamese

veterans than he had expected, based on complaints by American veterans.

Some Vietnamese officials said male veterans suffering from itchy skin, inability to sleep and other health problems, he reported, and one doctor said he was convinced that male veterans had chromosome damage. But Mr. Edwards said that Vietnam was such a primitive country that it had made no real effort to keep track of its veterans and determine their health problems.

Mr. Edwards said he would issue a report next week calling for an international study. He said it should be conducted by a respected international organization, perhaps the World Health Organization or the Food and Agricultural Organization, both of which are specialized United Nations agencies, because studies begun by either the United States or Vietnam alone would lack credibility.

He said he did not know if Agent Orange was connected with the genuine health problems experienced by Vietnam veterans, but added, "We have an obligation to get an answer to this conundrum."