

## Vietnam

# 40 years after the end of the war “Agent Orange” Continues to Poison

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**T**oday, more than forty years after the end of the war in Vietnam, about 60,000 adults and more than 200,000 children (1) still suffer from “Agent Orange”. Congenital defects, cancer, physical and mental handicaps represent a majority of the cases; the consequence of being exposed to more than 70 million litres of defoliants of which one is the infamous “Agent Orange” that was dispersed in the Centre and South Vietnam from 1961 to 1971 by the American Army. An agricultural country, 20 percent of the Vietnamese land absorbed 170 kg of dioxin. (3) Fighters on both sides were exposed; the civilian population gravely affected. The largest lawsuit ever in the United States against the heads of industrial chemical companies began in New York in 2005. The Vietnamese Association for Victims, represented by American lawyers, is asking for reparations and justice. The implications and the social and economic consequences of this trial are considerable considering at issue is the largest chemical war in History.

## Operation “Ranch Hand”

Not far from the road to Ho Chi Minh, Kan Lay, a 55-year old woman, holds her 14-year old physically and mentally handicapped son, Ke Van Bac, in her arms. (photo 03) During the war, Kan Lay lived in the region of A Luoi. “I was in the forest, I saw planes throw powder on us, it stung our eyes, burned our skins...” Since that day, her husband and three of her children have died of cancer. To help illustrate the photo, mother and son pose in front of a billboard denouncing operation “Ranch Hand” installed at the former military airport A Sho, in the valley of A Luoi. (Photo 25) In fact, it was in January of 1962, with the approval of J.F. Kennedy, that the American army began operation “Ranch Hand”. Airplanes and helicopters carried out missions to spread defoliants over the mountains of the Center and South Vietnam. A veritable chemical war whose goals were to destroy all vegetation that interfered with American aviation bombing, in particular, near the logistical road to Ho Chi Minh that ran along the eastern border of Laos, and to destroy all harvest and crops to starve the Viet Cong and its population living in zones under its control. Finally, the destruction of the forest permitted better observation and protection of the surroundings of military ambush installations. The results of this period have created an ecological disaster whose effects have lingered over time. The dioxin affects about 60,000 adults and more than 200,000 children (1) without speaking of the destruction of more than 2 million hectares of forest, responsible for the extinction of wildlife and flora, desertification and erosion of land. (5)

Contrary to civilian regulations, “Agent Orange” for the most part is dispersed non diluted. The pulverisation is 28 litres per hectare. Thousands of American soldiers, as well as their allies, were contaminated by these products. Although the Department of Defence (DOD) does not consider the herbicide “Agent Orange” as a toxin for human beings, experts at the National Institute of Health in the United States in 1969 revealed that congenital defects appeared in laboratory animals infected. Operation “Ranch Hand” was only stopped in 1971...During the next twenty years, in order to not compensate sick veterans and/or parents of handicapped children, certain Americans in leading positions have hidden or

falsified alarming scientific reports concerning the long term toxicity of dioxin. In this respect, on June 26 1990, Admiral Zumwalt, chief of spreading the herbicides during the war, presented a report to the American congress proving that the results of certain scientific studies were deliberately slanted notably by the Administration of Veterans (VA) and by the Centre of Control for Sickness (CDC). (6)

## **A veritable “Chemical Chernobyl”**

To this day, the surroundings of the former airport of A Sho are still polluted by dioxin. Between 1994 and 2000, research carried out by the committee 10/80 and the Canadian organisation, “Hatfield Consultants”, show that this airport is deeply contaminated. A veritable “Chemical Chernobyl”, the government recently obligated its habitants to leave the zone. Breeding animals and growing crops are forbidden. In this region, genetically defected persons count in the hundreds. Besides the physical suffering of the handicapped boy, Ke Van Bac, there are health care charges for the child not to mention the burden of guilt and inferiority his mother lives with.

Ho Van Moi, a veteran of the Viet Cong, was wounded in the leg after being hit by a shrapnel. Today he is a doctor and the director of the A Luoi Hospital. In a calm voice without resentment, he remembers his years as a Viet Cong soldier during the war. “Before there was the forest, and then they dropped these products, everything died – trees, animals and people... because of hunger, the people were so hungry they could not bury the dead. You cannot imagine what we suffered. The product was scattered on villages, then on the hills in the form of a liquid or even powder...if the population breathed these products, it was death. It was barbaric to have used these chemical products; the truth has to be said.” Today there are more than 2000 handicapped people in the region of A Luoi.

Further north, in the region of Quang Tri, Tran Van Tram, 55 years old, and his wife Tran Thi Dan, 54, began searching for metal to resell it just shortly after the war. Unknown to them, they were working in a zone affected by defoliants. Out of seven children, four of the children born after the war, are physically and mentally handicapped. (Photo 38) Family dramas are many. Nguyen Duc Thang, 9 years old, was abandoned by his parents but is protected by his grandmother. (Photo 02)

## **“They, they know.....”**

At the TU DU Hospital of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Ho Chi Minh City, dozens of glass jars are kept containing congenitally deformed fetuses, victims for the majority of “Agent Orange” (photo 05 and 06) Madame Nguyen Thi Ngoc Phuong, Director and Professor of medicine (photo 39) says, “They, they know...with their hearts, their souls, they must recognize their mistakes in front of the international community and the American people. They must take on the responsibility to not only help the Vietnamese, but also those from other countries implicated in the conflict.” (Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, Philippines...) In Ho Chi Minh City, the percentage of congenital malformations is superior to the national average. “Two thirds of the handicapped children that I care for come from regions affected by “Agent Orange,” explains the Doctor. This is the case for Ngyuen Duc, 23 years old, (photo 06) born with two heads. He was successfully operated on and today, Nguyen Duc works at the Tu Du Hospital performing administrative tasks. There is also the case of this young ten year old girl, Pham Thi Thuy Kinh, born without arms in the province of Hain Toy. An exemplary model of courage, willpower and hope, she attends school to learn and read with children her age. (Photo 7, 8, 9, 10, 11) Her father, a pilot in the South Vietnamese Air Force between 1960 and 1970, died of blood cancer in 1972.

In Binh Duong, at the Hospital Centre for Child Victims of “Agent Orange”, the doctors Nguyen Van Hoia and Tran Duc Cuong are calm and determined. (Photo 12) Funds and material are their priority needs. Yet Dr. Tran Duc Cuong cannot help but express himself, “I ask them to never do again what they did in Vietnam because the consequences are terrible, unimaginable.” The different hospitals all need ultrasound material in four dimensions in order to detect malformations. The rate of dioxin in South Vietnamese is 900 time higher than that of those living in North Vietnam. (7) Towards the Mekong Delta, a region also largely poisoned, Huynh Van Cam, a Viet Cong veteran, is responsible for building a school for handicapped children. (Photo 04) He is a quiet, reserved and cautious man. At the end of our meeting, in response to how he felt today, he answered directly, “What they did was inhuman and my greatest desire is that this never happens again.”

In conclusion, even if the list of various sicknesses that dioxin provokes remains to be established, and even if sometimes it is difficult to obtain proof between the cause and the effects, it is impossible to ignore the dreaded toxicity effect of “Agent Orange” on the health of humans. However, scientific studies carried out by Americans and the Vietnamese remain modest. Also, thirty years after the end of the war, Vietnam is still “a large human laboratory for the study of dioxin effects on human health”. Beyond the scientific studies and the statistics, this report hopes to illustrate the suffering and distress of children who are victims of this barbaric chemical. Thousands of them wait and hope for justice to pronounce and to recognize those who are responsible.

## REFERENCES

(1) Ph.M.Boffey – Agent Orange in Vietnam, 30 years later – New York Times, Sept 8, 1998. Agent Orange for child defects CNN World News – Hanoi April 13, 1996.

It’s estimated that 4,800,000 people were affected by “Agent Orange” in Vietnam according to a report prepared by Stellman firm.

(2) “Agent Orange”: (The name comes from the orange identifying bands that were used on the fifty-five gallon drums) A brownish rose coloured insoluble solution in water, composed of 50/50 from 2,4-D and from 2, 4, 5-T. The last component, the 2,4,5-T contains TCDD or 2,3,7,8 **tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin**, most commonly known as dioxin, the most toxic product known to man. Dioxin can stay in the environment for several decades. Other substances and herbicides used were Agent White (2,4-D and ¼ of pirochloram) Agent Blue (cacodylique acid and natri-cacodylate and arsenic) Agent Purple (n-butyl-2,4-D and n-butyl 2,4,5-t) Agent Rose (n-butyl-2,4,5-t iso-butyl-2,4,5-t) Agent Green (n- butyl ester 2,4,5-T) + gas CS and DDT.

<http://www.lewispublishing.com/faq.htm>

(3) Ian Steward – Associated Press 1997 <http://vvof.org/article.htm>

(4)Dow Chemical, Monsanto, Uniroyal, Hercules, Diamond Shamrock, Thomson Chemical and T.H. Agriculture, have already paid \$180 million dollars to American veterans in 1984.

(5) Apocalypse Forever – Vietnam after the Fire – Edward Millar – Arte 11/02/95

(6) Report by Admiral E.R. Zumwalt, responsible for the chemical dispersal missions in Vietnam, submitted to the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs. His son, Marine Lieutenant in Vietnam, died of cancer triggered by dioxin in 1998, and his grandson suffers from congenital defects.

(7) Ref: H.Lindsey Arison 111 The Herbicidal Warfare Program in Vietnam. 1961-1971. Operation Trail Dust-Ranch Hand – May 1, 1996. Information taken from the article by Mr. Q. Tho Pham, Director of Research for the CNRS, October 1999 – “Belgium Chicken and Agent Orange in Vietnam, Toxicity of Dioxins and Man’s Responsibility”

(8) The lawsuit by the victims of “Agent Orange” was filed by American lawyers who are defending the civil party, on January 31, 2004 at the Tribunal of First Instance in the American federal Justice whose headquarters is located in East Brooklyn, New York. The trial opens on February 22, 2005. The residing judge handling this case is Jack Weinstein.

#### **SPECIAL THANKS TO:**

Madame Phuong Ngyuen

Help and donations can be sent to “**Vietnam, Children of Dioxin**”

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