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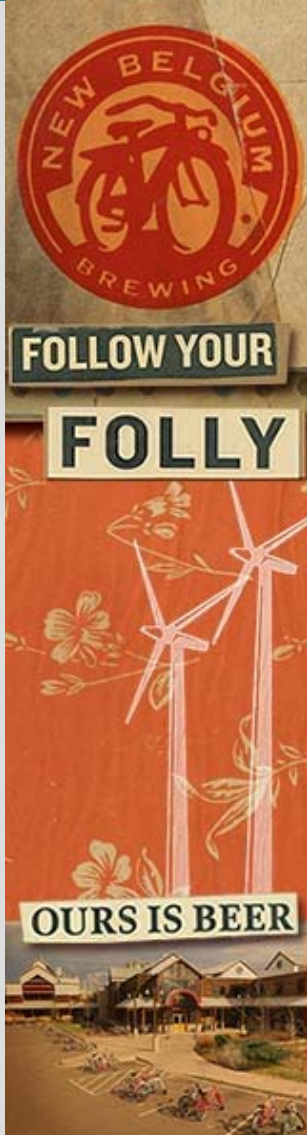
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Generations Later, Toxic Legacy of Agent Orange Lives on in Vietnam

June 15, 2007 — *By Ben Stocking, Associated Press*

DANANG, Vietnam -- More than 30 years after the Vietnam War ended, the poisonous legacy of Agent Orange has emerged anew with a scientific study that has found extraordinarily high levels of health-threatening contamination at the former U.S. air base at Danang.

"They're the highest levels I've ever seen in my life," said Thomas Boivin, the scientist who conducted the tests this spring. "If this site were in the U.S. or Canada, it would require significant studies and immediate cleanup."

Soil tests by his firm, Hatfield Consultants of Canada, found levels of dioxin, the highly toxic chemical compound in Agent Orange, that were 300 to 400 times higher than internationally accepted limits.

The report has not yet been released, but Boivin and Vietnamese officials summarized its central findings for The Associated Press.

Earlier tests by Hatfield, which has been working in Vietnam since 1994, showed that dioxin levels were safe across most of Vietnam. But until the study of the old air base at Danang, the consulting firm had never had access to some half-dozen "hotspots" where Agent Orange, a defoliant designed to deny Vietnamese jungle cover, was stored and mixed before being loaded onto planes.

The study is the product of a new spirit of cooperation between Washington and Hanoi -- after years of disagreement -- toward resolving this contentious leftover of the war that ended in 1975.

On a visit to Vietnam last fall, President Bush and Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet agreed to work together to address dioxin contamination at old Agent Orange storage sites. They are expected to discuss the issue further when Triet visits Washington next week.

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The worst contamination in Danang is confined to a small section of the 2,100-acre base, the former Agent Orange mixing area.

The dioxin poses no immediate threat to the vast majority of the city's nearly 1 million people or the Danang International Airport terminal, which sits on the sprawling site and is widely used by tourists headed for Danang's beaches.

But blood tests found elevated dioxin levels in several dozen people who regularly fished or harvested lotus flowers from a contaminated lake on the site.

Tests also confirmed that rainwater has carried dioxin into city drains and into parts of a neighboring community that is home to more than 100,000 people, Boivin said. The levels there are only slightly elevated, but could rise if the dioxin isn't properly contained.

The levels fall off dramatically outside the base, said Charles Bailey, Vietnam representative of the Ford Foundation, which financed Hatfield's study. "Nevertheless, it's a public health threat, and it's a risk."

The United States is paying US\$400,000 for an engineering study of how to clean up the site. Ford, a New York-based charitable organization, is also paying for temporary containment measures, which will begin this summer, before monsoon season.

For some, though, the effort comes too late.

Nguyen Van Dung, 38, and his family have lived just outside the air base since 1990. Dung used to bring home fish he caught in Lotus Lake.

At about age 2, his daughter began manifesting grotesque health problems.

Now 7, Nguyen Thi Kieu Nhung's shin bones curve sharply and appear to be broken in several places, as though smashed with a hammer. Her right shoulder bone protrudes unnaturally, stretching her skin. She has only two teeth, her right eye bulges from its socket and she has sores on her face. She can't walk; she can only slide around on her rear end.

When her mother, Luu Thi Thu, changes her daughter's shirt, Nhung screams in pain.

"If they had acted before, we wouldn't have been exposed," Thu said. "I'm angry, but I don't know what to do. I go to the pagoda twice a month to pray that my daughter will get better."

Her doctors say she won't.

The Vietnamese military has taken some steps to contain the dioxin, but Le Ke Son, Vietnam's top Agent Orange official, said cleaning up Danang and other Agent Orange hotspots is likely to cost at least US\$40 million, far more than the developing country can afford.

"We have asked the American side to be more active, not just in doing research into the effects of Agent Orange but in overcoming its consequences," Son said. "Until we resolve this issue, we can't really say that we have truly normalized relations."

The U.S. Congress recently set aside US\$3 million to address dioxin contamination in Vietnam, and U.S. Ambassador Michael Marine said some of it could be used to help pay for a cleanup.

He said other donors, including the United Nations Development Program, might contribute.

Boivin said the U.S. should take the lead. "There's a real need for the U.S. to step up to the plate here and fund the clean up of these sites," he said.

During the war, U.S. troops stored Agent Orange in 180-liter (48-gallon) barrels at a loading station on the base and diluted it with water before loading it on planes. In the process, the herbicide often spilled onto the ground.

Dioxin attaches itself to dirt and sediment and stays for generations, posing danger to people who touch it. Although not absorbed by crops such as rice, it remains in the fat of fish and other animals

that ingest it and can be passed to humans through the food chain.

Rainwater drains across the old mixing area and into Lotus Lake on the northern side of the site, where sediment tests showed dioxin levels 50 times the international limit.

The water sometimes also runs off into a city drain, carrying dioxin with it, Boivin said.

In Thanh Khe district, just over the meter-high (3-foot-high) wall that surrounds the lake, Hatfield found dioxin levels that were slightly elevated but generally within accepted limits. Levels in a neighborhood three miles away were normal.

The company said blood tests of 55 residents found safe dioxin levels for those who lived away from the base, and elevated levels among those who had regularly visited Lotus Lake. One had dioxin levels 175 times above the safety limit.

There are no warning signs at the northern edge of the lake, in a lush and wild area by a crowded neighborhood. On a recent day, a man stood at the lake with a fishing rod.

The Danang project marks a significant change in the U.S. attitude toward Agent Orange, said Chuck Searcy of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund.

"For years, the official U.S. position was basically denial," Searcy said. "Now the U.S. wants to demonstrate that we will consider all possibilities and try to agree on ways to approach this problem."

The findings of the U.S.-funded engineering study, conducted by New Jersey-based BEM Associates, could also be applied to other Agent Orange hotspots, including the former Bien Hoa Air Base in Dong Nai province and the former Phu Cat Air Base in Binh Dinh province.

Vietnam and the United States have long disagreed about Agent Orange's impact on human health.

Vietnam says up to 3 million of its 84 million people have birth defects or other health problems related to dioxin. The United States says the number is much lower and that more scientific study is needed to prove a link to Agent Orange.

The U.S. compensates American war veterans who say they were exposed to Agent Orange if they have certain health problems that have been linked to the herbicide.

A lawsuit seeking compensation from Agent Orange manufacturers, filed by the Vietnam Agent Orange Victims Association, is to be heard by a U.S. appeals court on Monday.

Ambassador Marine said in an interview that the U.S. does not plan to provide direct compensation. But he noted that, on top of the US\$3 million Congress approved, Washington has spent US\$43 million since 1989 helping Vietnamese with disabilities, regardless of their causes.

"I think we've made progress in the last couple of years in our joint work to try to understand this issue better and find a constructive way of dealing with it," Marine said.

Some of the U.S. money could go toward caring for people such as Nguyen Thi Trang Ngan, 17.

Ngan's mother, Nguyen Thi Thuy Lieu, grew up next to the base and used to enter it regularly to get candy from the U.S. troops. The family fished in Lotus Lake and drank water from a nearby well.

Now her daughter can't speak, sit up, walk, feed herself or get dressed. She makes strange, uncontrolled grunting sounds and sucks her thumb.

"War always brings suffering," her mother said. "I don't blame anyone for it. This is my fate."

Sometimes, when she comforts Ngan, her daughter laughs. "That's my greatest happiness," Lieu said.

Source: Associated Press

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