

## U.S., Vietnam still at odds

BY ANDREW METZ  
STAFF WRITER

August 1, 2005

A decade after the United States and Vietnam normalized relations, the leaders of the two countries made history again last month, holding an historic meeting at the White House -- the first by a prime minister of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam -- and advancing cooperation on everything from security to economics.

But there is still a major divide: Agent Orange.

About 12 million gallons of the herbicide were sprayed over South Vietnam in an effort to deprive the enemy of cover. It turned dense, triple canopy forests into raked landscapes covered by a useless scrub that Vietnamese call "American Grass." To this day, the herbicide taints soil, water and people.

As much as U.S. veterans were exposed to dioxin, the contaminant in Agent Orange, scientists, activists and lawyers say the impact has been more pervasive on the Vietnamese and their country.

"This is almost certainly the most highly exposed population to dioxins. They are not like the vets that were there for a couple of years. These are people that have lived there," said David Carpenter, director of the Institute for Health and the Environment at the University at Albany, who was chosen to lead unprecedented U.S.-Vietnamese research into the link between widespread birth defects and the defoliant. "Dioxin stays in the soil and in sediments for many, many, many, years. Their exposure long outlasts the duration and the spraying of Agent Orange."

Unlike the other collaboration between the old enemies, however, efforts to dispel this enduring ghost of the war have foundered. U.S. health officials earlier this year canceled the birth defect research agreed to in 2002, citing a lack of cooperation. And the Vietnamese are trying to keep alive a class action suit against the chemical manufacturers after the case was rejected in February at the trial level.

"At the end of World War Two, we helped rebuild Japan, Germany and Italy," said Suel Jones, a Vietnam veteran, who now works with deformed and sick Vietnamese children. "It can be difficult to deal with Vietnam. I understand that. But we as a nation have never dealt with Vietnam and the



moral issue of what happened ... You just don't walk away from a war and leave people to die."

In 1975, the United States renounced the wartime use of herbicides and the Senate ratified a longstanding international ban on deploying poisons during conflicts. But U.S. officials have long said the Vietnamese allegations of extreme health problems are unsubstantiated and exaggerated. The government has opposed the class action suit -- which covers as many as four million alleged victims -- insisting that it would invite former enemies into American courts.

Brooklyn federal Judge Jack Weinstein earlier this year seemed to agree. He dismissed claims the companies violated international conventions on chemical warfare and ruled that the firms were shielded from liability anyway because they were contractors following military orders.

The companies, who in 1984 agreed to a \$180 million Agent Orange settlement with U.S. veterans, have also refused to accept any blame.

"War damages people, lives and the environment," said Scot Wheeler, a spokesman for Dow, one of the manufacturers. "Any future issues involving Agent Orange should be the responsibility of the respective governments as a matter of political and social policy."

In the absence of such rapprochement, Vietnamese and Western scientists describe a ravaged country. Vo Quy, a Vietnamese biologist who has studied Agent Orange since 1971, said dioxin is in its third generation affecting the ecosystem.

"They destroyed our environment and have made a lot of difficulties for the poorest people in our country, for their children, for their grandchildren," said Quy, a senior member of the Vietnam Association for Victims of Agent Orange, which brought the lawsuit.

Arnold Schecter, a public health physician at the University of Texas, said there are still "real doubts" about the cause of the birth defects. But, he said, "what is not in dispute at all is that there are elevated levels of dioxin in many Vietnamese."

Schecter has made about 24 trips to Vietnam since 1984 and said that, in some cases, dioxin levels "are just as high now as when the spraying occurred."

In findings to be published in the August edition of the journal *Chemosphere*, Canadian environmental scientists contend that the most toxic sites are around former U.S. bases. At one installation, the team from Hatfield Consultants in Vancouver found dioxin levels in soil of 900 parts per trillion, said Wayne Dwernychuck, who led the research. Typically, in the U.S., levels are below 10 parts per trillion.

"We followed the dioxin molecule from soil, into fishponds into fish and duck tissue and then into humans, their blood and breast milk," he said. "It is unequivocally the result of Agent Orange."

Carpenter, who led the aborted health research, said the attempt to finally reach mutual conclusions and begin the healing was doomed by mistrust.

"The Vietnamese have been blaming the U.S. for the high rates of birth defects and therefore they would not have been happy had we shown that there was no significant relationship," he said. "On the other hand, if we proved that there was a relationship, the U.S. would certainly be held liable."

The Environmental Protection Agency is still working with the Vietnamese to start gauging the

environmental impact of Agent Orange, so far focussing on equipment, supplies and training. William Farland, a senior EPA administrator, said this fall the sides plan to evaluate one known hot spot.

For Phan Thi Phi Phi, 69, a lead plaintiff in the suit and one of Vietnam's premier experts on Agent Orange, proving what she has seen firsthand has been a life's work.

From 1966 to 1972, she ran a mobile hospital in heavily sprayed areas. After the war, she had four successive miscarriages that she attributes to the defoliant.

"For me, now, it is no problem, it was many years ago, but there are many other victims," she said. "It is about justice, human rights."

"In 1984, the companies agreed to pay \$180 million to veterans who fought in the Vietnam War and I hope these chemical companies will give us money too."

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