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Vietnam Ends Silence on Issue of Wartime Exposure to Agent Orange

Asia: It has linked herbicide used by U.S. to deformities in babies. Hanoi is seeking help in finding solution.

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HANOI — Not until he was dying did Dao My tell his family his secret of the war. His voice was faint and raspy, and the gaunt face bore little resemblance to that of the smiling man who, in a photograph on the bedside table, wore the uniform of a North Vietnamese colonel and a chestful of medals.

"There is Agent Orange in my body," his wife remembers him saying.

"And in yours," he added, nodding to his two handicapped sons. "I have seen doctors. There are no drugs, no cures. It is time you understand this, and perhaps I should not have waited so many years to tell you."

My was 62 when he died two years ago. He had diabetes, a bad heart, itchy skin, respiratory problems--the result, his wife believes, of his exposure to chemical defoliants sprayed by the United States over Vietnam's southern jungles, where he fought for six years. She cites their five children as evidence: The three born before My went south are normal; the two after Agent Orange entered his blood, are severely disabled, mentally and physically.

His wife, Nguyen Thi Nhan, 67, who lives on a \$14-a-month pension and cares for her two sons, now 29 and 27, smiles today, remembering the joy she felt when My, home from the war, appeared unexpectedly at her door in 1975. She had not seen him or heard a word about him in three years.

"He said, 'Get some food for a party,' " she recalled. "But all I could manage was crab chowder. No beer. No wine. It was wartime." She sighed quietly. "In Hanoi, it was always wartime."

Hanoi, basking in a generation of peace, is now a prosperous place, its markets bountifully supplied. But the legacy of war lingers.

Families in Vietnam search for 300,000 soldiers still listed as missing in action. Mines laid three decades ago still explode, killing farmers and children. Deformed, disabled kids known as "Agent Orange babies" are still born in large numbers. And studies on the people most affected by chemical defoliants used in the war lag far behind those done on U.S. servicemen who became victims.

"Agent Orange is our most important problem remaining from the war," said Nguyen Van Hoi, director of the state's War Aftermath Division. "It is a bigger problem than the mines, bigger than the number of handicapped from the war. It is getting more and more serious, and it is something we need scientific and financial support to solve."

For a long time Vietnam remained relatively silent about the problems created by Agent Orange, a defoliant named for the color of the band around the barrels in which the chemical was stored. Though Hanoi did study its effects and hold seminars on the use of herbicides in war, it never directly raised the issue with visiting groups of U.S. officials or veterans.

"I asked the foreign affairs ministry a couple of years ago why," a U.S. veteran said, "and their reply was that relations with the United States were slowly normalizing, and it wouldn't have been constructive."

But in the last several months, with normal relations realized and a U.S. ambassador now in residence, Vietnam has taken Agent Orange out of the closet.

Articles about its continuing effects are printed almost daily in state-run newspapers, and officials never miss an opportunity to raise the issue with visiting U.S. delegations--partly as a counterweight to Americans who always bring up U.S. MIAs. Vietnam has kept discussions free of political rhetoric and has not mentioned compensation. What it wants, the government says, is scientific help to research the precise depth of the problem and to find a solution.

Tran Van Dieu, 47, who served as an artillery gunner near Da Nang and has two mentally disabled sons, remembers the U.S. C-123 cargo planes that used to sweep low over the jungle-covered hills, trailing misty plumes of defoliants. Within a day or two the canopy of leaves would disappear, and in a few weeks a swath of jungle would be stripped bare of all living things.

"We thought of it as more a nuisance than a danger," Dieu said. "Our commanders gave us gas masks, but usually we threw them away. We'd just put wet scarves over our nose and mouth when the planes came.

"When you are a soldier, you expect to suffer. Soldiers on both sides suffered. So I don't hold the Americans responsible, but I wish someone would help solve my difficulties. My wife and I have to do everything for our boys, and that means I am home all day and cannot work."

Operation Ranch Hand, carried out from 1962 to 1971, was designed to destroy the camouflage the jungle provided Communist supply routes and base camps--not to kill or maim. During that period, the U.S. dumped 12 million gallons of chemicals on South Vietnam, said to be the most used in any war. The chemicals destroyed 14% of South Vietnam's forests, according to official U.S. reports.

Generally the herbicides--the most prominent of which was Agent Orange--dissipated within weeks but left behind a toxic contaminant, dioxin, that was inadvertently created during the manufacturing process. Dioxin, Vietnamese officials say, remains to this day in the soil of regions that were heavily sprayed--and in the blood of soldiers and civilians who spent long periods in the areas.

Vietnam, which runs 11 hospices called "peace villages" for "Agent Orange babies," estimates that half a million people have died or contracted serious illnesses over the years because of the chemical campaign. It says about 70,000 are still affected.

The United States has no official position on the effects of Agent Orange on the Vietnamese, with its diplomats saying only that more evidence is needed to prove a link between the chemicals and the birth of deformed babies. Vietnam believes that it has established the link beyond a reasonable doubt but acknowledges that its findings may fall short of what the international scientific community would accept as conclusive evidence.

Dioxin is found in people everywhere, in proportion to the industrialization in their countries, and scientists say it would be expensive and difficult at this late date to establish that Agent Orange--not the chemicals that farmers spray on their crops, or other factors--was responsible for deformities.

"To be frank, some American scientists question our findings," said Dr. Hoan Dinh Cau, chairman of the national committee researching the effects of Agent Orange. "But they don't say what we have found is not true. They just say more research is needed."

In 1978, Washington told Hanoi during talks aimed at mending relations that there were two subjects that would end the discussion immediately if they were even brought up. One was compensation to rebuild the North. The other was Agent Orange.

American servicemen--whose exposure to dioxin was measured in months, as opposed to years for many North Vietnamese soldiers--reached an out-of-court settlement in 1984 in their liability suit over generic effects and illnesses associated with Agent Orange. The seven manufacturers paid \$180 million to establish a fund for the veterans, who number at least 180,000.