

February 1, 2008 Friday 2:12 PM GMT

U.S. and Vietnam take steps to contain Agent Orange contamination at old U.S. air base

By BEN STOCKING, Associated Press Writer

More than three decades after the Vietnam War, the United States and Vietnam have just completed temporary steps to contain dioxin contamination at a former U.S. air base in Danang.

But the U.S. government, as well as U.S. foundations and corporations, should contribute more money to clean up the site permanently, members of a joint U.S.-Vietnamese working group on Agent Orange said Friday.

The panel members visited Vietnam this week to meet with U.S. and Vietnamese officials and see the containment work done in Danang, which was completed on Jan. 15.

It will cost at least \$14 million to remove dioxin from the site, one of several Agent Orange "hot spots" in Vietnam, said the panel members, who are experts on the environmental, health and political consequences of the herbicide.

"What was once a sensitive and taboo subject between our two countries is now being worked on cooperatively and effectively," said Susan Beresford, the former president of the Ford Foundation, who convened the Agent Orange working group.

Last May, the U.S. Congress set aside \$3 million to clean up Vietnamese sites contaminated by Agent Orange and to finance health programs for people who live near them, many of whom suffer serious illnesses and deformities from exposure to dioxin, the highly toxic chemical compound in the defoliant.

Commission members welcomed that contribution as an important step toward resolving the most contentious remaining legacy of the Vietnam War. But much more money will be needed to solve the problem, said panel member Ton Nu Thi Ninh, a former ambassador and member of Vietnam's National Assembly.

"The significance of the \$3 million is more political than practical," Ninh said, adding, "I hope that's just the first envelope."

The government still hasn't decided how it will allocate the money, but some may be used to pay for cleanup at the old Danang air base, where U.S. troops used to store, mix and load Agent Orange onto planes.

The U.S. sprayed more than 20 million gallons of Agent Orange and other herbicides across Vietnam during the war to strip Vietnamese guerrillas of ground cover and kill their crops.

While the threat to the food chain has largely disappeared, dioxin remains in soil and sediment for years and poses a serious health threat to anyone who touches it.

Last year, after years of disagreement on the issue, the United States and Vietnam began working together to address it.

They commissioned a study of the Danang site that found dioxin levels 300 to 400 times higher than internationally accepted limits, according to Vietnamese officials. The study confirmed that rainwater had carried dioxin into city drains and into parts of a neighboring community that is home to more than 100,000 people.

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

The U.S. contributed \$400,000 to help fund the study as well as temporary containment measures to keep dioxin from moving off the old base, one of three high-priority sites the Vietnamese government has identified for cleanup.

The Vietnamese Ministry of Defense did the temporary containment work, covering the old Agent Orange storage area with concrete and tanks that capture rainwater running off the site and filter dioxin out of the water.

They have also reinforced a wall around the site and built watchtowers to prevent people from entering.

"These are only preliminary steps," said Lt. Gen. Phung Khac Dang, the vice president of the Vietnam Veterans Association and member of the Agent Orange panel. "It is our dear hope that we could very soon eliminate the risk altogether. As long as the dioxin is still there, it poses a danger."

Vietnam believes as many as 4 million people have suffered serious health problems associated with the defoliant. The U.S. says the actual number is probably far lower and that further scientific study is needed to understand the link between Agent Orange and health.