

Partnerships to Heal the Wounds of War

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**For the hearing on “Our Forgotten Responsibility:
What Can We Do to Help Victims of Agent Orange?”**

**United States House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific and the Global Environment**

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Mr. Chairman,

Thank you for this opportunity to submit a statement in my capacity as President and CEO of The Aspen Institute for the Subcommittee's hearing on "Our Forgotten Responsibility: What Can We Do to Help Victims of Agent Orange?" The Aspen Institute is an international nonprofit organization dedicated to fostering enlightened leadership and open-minded dialogue. Over a span of two decades The Aspen Institute has promoted a series of Track Two exercises intended to further understanding and cooperation between the United States and its former adversaries in the Vietnam War. For several years in the late 1980's and early 1990's, Aspen's Indochina Project brought together policymakers and scholars on both sides of the Pacific to encourage normalization between the United States and Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

Aspen's current work in this realm is more specific but is still concerned with addressing the legacies of the war. Last year Aspen launched a program to promote advocacy and exchange on Agent Orange/Dioxin, with the aim of educating Americans about the continuing impact of dioxin on human health and the environment in Vietnam. In addition, I am honored to co-chair the US-Vietnam Dialogue on Agent Orange/Dioxin with Madame Ton Nu Thi Ninh, founding president of Tri Viet University and former Vice Chair of the International Relations Committee of the National Assembly of Vietnam.

The Parameters of the Problem

Through Department of Defense records and recent studies, it is possible to quantify the amount of herbicides with dioxin that were dropped on Vietnam from 1962 to 1971 during the war. The United States sprayed a minimum of 20 tons of chemicals – although new reports uncovered suggest that much more was used - to defoliate dense jungle and detect movement of personnel and equipment from north to south, and to destroy enemy crops. During this time, Agent Orange and other herbicides were stored at the large US airbases in Danang and Bien Hoa. Containers of these chemicals occasionally leaked or were spilled, leeching into the soil and carried by monsoon waters to the communities surrounding the bases.

We may never be able to quantify the human health and environmental cost to Vietnam of this wartime operation. We can, however, see its impact in the alarming rates of birth defects, cancers and other health disorders believed to be linked to dioxin in Vietnamese veterans and their children, as well as in civilians living where the chemicals were sprayed or stored. Rough estimates by the Vietnamese government suggest that as many as one million people may have been affected in this way. Some of the millions of acres of vegetation destroyed by the spraying may be reclaimed in the long term, but the ecology of the affected areas has been disturbed for decades, and some animal species have been threatened with extinction.

Nor is this damage finite. The United States left behind 25 “hot spots” where Agent Orange leaked or was spilled, and these highly toxic spots continue to contaminate people living in the area. Thus, Agent Orange finds new victims in Vietnam on a daily basis. At the same time, birth defects caused by genetic damage related to dioxin are now seen in the third generation of Vietnamese. The complex nature of the ongoing contamination calls for a variety of strategies to mitigate the damage of Agent Orange rather than a single solution.

The US-Vietnam Dialogue on Agent Orange/Dioxin

Although US-Vietnam relations have expanded dramatically in the past decade, the issue of Agent Orange is a significant obstacle to deepening the relationship. Two kinds of partnerships are needed to address this multi-faceted problem. First, US Government and US civil society institutions must come together to offer the strongest and most humane American response possible. Second, partnerships are needed between Vietnamese and Americans to identify appropriate interventions and implement programs in the most effective way possible.

In early 2007 the US-Vietnam Dialogue on Agent Orange/Dioxin was established with leadership and funds from the Ford Foundation. Susan Berresford, former president of the Ford Foundation, is convenor of the Dialogue, which seeks to build a collective bipartisan and bilateral humanitarian response to a sensitive issue that has thus far eluded an easy resolution. The Dialogue Group has held three meetings in the past year, two in Vietnam and one in the United States. In Vietnam, the DG has visited people affected by dioxin exposure in several locations, including Ho Chi Minh City; Bien Hoa; Danang; Quang Ngai; and Thai Binh.

The Dialogue Group is not a funding agency *per se*, but seeks to identify funds and additional partners in five priority areas:

- o Containing dioxin at former airbases to prevent ongoing and future contamination;*
- o Expanding services to people with disabilities, with particular attention to populations in affected areas;*
- o Establishing a world-class high resolution dioxin laboratory in Vietnam to help measure the extent of contamination and contribute to international research on this subject;*
- o Restoring landscape and other aspects of the environment affected by the wartime use of Agent Orange; and*
- o Educating Americans about the continuing impact of dioxin in Vietnam*

and “mainstreaming” this issue in the US policy community and with the US public.

Funds for initial activities in these priority areas have been provided by the Ford Foundation through its Special Initiative on Agent Orange/Dioxin. However, as noted above, one central mission of the Dialogue Group is to identify a wider circle of private sector partners to join this effort. As well, the DG seeks to educate policymakers in the US Government and international institutions to encourage a significant and sustainable contribution to the remediation of Agent Orange.

The Road Ahead

Although we have seen a new, if low-key, willingness to address the problem of Agent Orange on the part of American policymakers and non-governmental groups, the bulk of the work is still to be done. For example, the Ford Foundation has worked in partnership with the Environmental Protection Agency and the US State Department to begin containment of dioxin at the Danang airport, but actual clean-up of the residual chemicals on the base must await future funding. Arguably the most long-term and complex problem in this portfolio is addressing the human health costs of dioxin exposure, and the profound needs of disabled Vietnamese and their families. Although responsibility for contamination of the former bases belongs to the United States, it is not possible to make such a clear-cut determination on human health issues. In that realm, assistance to the disabled should be offered on humanitarian grounds.

Finally, we should never forget that US Vietnam War veterans and their families have suffered similar problems linked to dioxin. They have been generous in their support for assistance to their Vietnamese counterparts, but they too are in need of closer attention, with expanded and more sustained services.

I commend the Subcommittee for these hearings, which represent the first time the issue of Agent Orange in Vietnam has been considered in a Congressional forum of this kind. It is my hope that they will serve two purposes. First, that the hearings will help educate Americans on the need for a humanitarian response to this issue as a legacy of a tragic war that is still rooted in our national consciousness. Second, that the hearings will lead eventually to separate legislation and other official measures that will guarantee that Vietnamese are no longer contaminated on an ongoing basis by the chemicals we used during the war, and that those whose past exposure has left them with harsh and lifelong disabilities will benefit from humanitarian assistance.