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The Legacy of Agent Orange

You ask what we were doing over there all those years: what it was all about? I'll tell you pure and simple: it was a noble cause. -- Ronald Reagan

Occasionally I saw these [genetically deformed] children in contaminated villages in the Mekong Delta; and whenever I asked about them, people pointed to the sky; one man scratched in the dust a good likeness of a bulbous C-130 aircraft, spraying. -- John Pilger

The US has dumped [on South Vietnam] a quantity of toxic chemical amounting to six pounds per head of population, including women and children. -- US Senator Gaylord Nelson

Perhaps the most gruesome legacy of Agent Orange is to be found in a locked room in Tu Du Obstetrical and Gynaecological Hospital in Saigon. Here the walls are lined with jars containing aborted and full term foetuses. -- Hugh Warwick

Monsanto has in fact submitted false information to EPA which directly resulted in weakened regulations ... -- Cate Jenkins

Monsanto covered up the dioxin contamination of a wide range of its products. Monsanto either failed to report contamination, submitted false information purporting to show no contamination or submitted samples to the government for analysis which had been specially prepared so that dioxin contamination did not exist. -- Cate Jenkins

It will take a long time to clarify the exact consequences of Agent Orange. -- Douglas Peterson, US Ambassador to Vietnam

We need more facts ... There is need for more scientific research on this subject before factual statements can be made to the effect Agent Orange had in Vietnam. -- Madeline Albright

International research has proven that, during the war, 72 million litres of chemicals were poured onto Vietnam, over 40 million were dioxins - there is a link. -- Vu Trong Huong, director War Crimes Investigation

We have over 50,000 children that have been born with horrific deformities; the link is clear. -- Vu Trong Huong, director War Crimes Investigation

These Agent Orange births are normal for us ... Every now and then we have what we call a foetal catastrophe - when the number of miscarriages and deformed babies, I am afraid to say, overwhelms us. -- Dr Pham Viet Thanh, Tu Du hospital

We were wrong, terribly wrong. -- Robert McNamara, former US Secretary of Defence during Vietnam War

Never again must the US or any other country interfere in another country's affairs. -- Len Aldis, secretary Britain-Vietnam Friendship Society

It should never be forgotten that the people must have priority. -- Ho Chi Minh

Agent Orange was used in Vietnam by the Americans during the Vietnam War. Code named Operation Hades, Agent Orange was part of a defoliant programme to deny cover for the Viet Cong. The Vietnam War was not the first time defoliants had been used. The British used defoliants in Malaya during counter-insurgency operations. ICI supplied the chemicals and according to a Colonial Office report saw it as 'a lucrative field for experiment'. To cut back forest to deny the opportunity for ambush is nothing new. In England, in the Middle Ages, either side of a highway was cut back to a set distance to deny the opportunity for highway robbers. What was new was the use of toxic chemicals.

Agent Orange (a 50:50 mix of 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T) was one of several defoliants used. The others were Agent Pink, Agent Blue and Agent White. The names were derived from the colour coding of the drums containing the defoliants.

Test trials of Agent Orange were carried out in Puerto Rico.

The US imposed a military government on Puerto Rico a century ago when it was seized from the Spanish. The island of Vieques (40 miles off the coast, population 5,500) has been used for target practise by the US military for the last 60 years. Since 1980 it has been used for test firing of depleted uranium munitions, chemical contaminants have found their way into ground water, local crabs have 20 times the normal levels of heavy metals, cancer rates amongst the island's population is twice the national average.

Agent Orange was manufactured by Monsanto, Dow Chemicals (manufacturers of napalm), Uniroyal, Hercules, Diamond Shamrock, Thompson Chemical and TH Agriculture. Monsanto were the main supplier. The Agent Orange produced by Monsanto had dioxin levels many times higher than that produced by Dow Chemicals, the other major supplier of Agent Orange to Vietnam.

Dioxins are one of the most toxic chemicals known to man. Permissible levels are measured in parts per trillion, the ideal level is zero. The Agent Orange manufactured by Monsanto contained 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin (TCDD), extremely deadly even when measured against other dioxins. The levels found in domestic 2,4,5-T were around 0.05 ppm, that shipped to Vietnam peaked at 50 ppm, ie 1,000 times higher than the norm.

Monsanto's involvement with the production of dioxin contaminated 2,4,5-T dates back to the late 1940s. 'Almost immediately workers started getting sick with skin rashes, inexplicable pains in the limbs, joints and other parts of the body, weakness, irritability, nervousness and loss of libido,' to quote Peter Sills, author of a forthcoming book on dioxins. Internal Monsanto memos show that Monsanto knew of the problems but once again a cover-up was the order of the day.

A wide range of products manufactured by Monsanto have been contaminated with dioxins, including the widely used household disinfectant Lysol. Monsanto's attempts at a cover-up were revealed when a court awarded \$16 million in punitive damages against Monsanto. It was revealed that Monsanto had intimidated employees to keep quiet, had tampered with evidence, had submitted false data and samples to EPA. An investigation by Cate Jenkins of the EPA Regulatory Development Branch documented a track record of systematic criminal fraud.

Accidents involving large release of dioxin to the environment have occurred at Seveso (Italy) and Times Beach (USA). The Times Beach incident occurred when local contractors were hired to spray the town's dusty roads with emulsified oil. The oil was taken from sumps (which the same contractors had been hired to dispose of). Too late it was discovered that the oil was heavily contaminated with dioxin. The US government ordered the town to be evacuated in 1982. Times Beach lies not far from East St Louis, a chronically deprived, heavily contaminated area across the Mississippi from St Louis, centre of Monsanto's PCB manufacturing. Monsanto are believed to be linked to the Time Beach contamination, at least that is the view of the Times Beach Action

Group (TBAG) 'From our point of view, Monsanto is at the heart of our problem here in Missouri.' TBAG cite contaminated soil samples that have been traced back to Monsanto.

Monsanto's contribution to the well being of the world has included dioxin, rBGH, PCBs, DDT, Agent Orange and Roundup. Monsanto is currently aggressively pushing genetically modified crops, a technology the world does not need and does not want. For Monsanto, corporate greed far outweighs planetary need. Monsanto aggressively pursues anyone who dares to criticise their policies.

A leaked US EPA report has reclassified dioxins as ten times more dangerous than previously thought. Cancer specialist Richard Clapp has described dioxins as 'the Darth Vader of toxic chemicals'. Dioxins are responsible for 37% of cancers in the US. The many birth defects and genetic abnormalities in Vietnam are the result of dousing the country with dioxin-contaminated Agent Orange.

Operation Hades, later changed to Operation Ranch Hand, sprayed 6 million acres of forest in Vietnam, 19 million gallons of defoliant. The intention was to turn Vietnam into desert, to cause such destruction that Vietnam would never recover.

The first and most immediate effect of Operation Ranch Hand was the loss of tree cover. Millions of acres of forest destroyed. It was only later that the carcinogenic and other effects began to emerge.

US service men, who at most only served a few months tour of duty, have suffered from cancers, skin disorders and liver disorders. In an out-of-court settlement in May 1984 the manufacturers were forced to pay \$180 million in damages for exposure to Agent Orange, little more than 'nuisance value'. Monsanto as the key defendant was forced by the presiding judge to contribute 45.5% of the total pay-out.

The most gruesome legacy caused by spraying Vietnam with dioxin contaminated Agent Orange was that born by the Vietnamese themselves. In a locked room of Tu Du Obstetrical and Gynaecological Hospital in Saigon are rows of formaldehyde-filled jars containing deformed foetuses, a grotesque illustration of Man's inhumanity to Man. The level of poverty in Vietnam prevents the preservation of further examples. Many of the living have fared little better, limb deformities, cancers.

Viet and Duc were born joined together as one body. It took a pioneering 14 hour operation to separate the two children. A recent Reuters report gave details of a baby girl born in south Vietnam. She had one body, two heads, two hearts, two spines, one set of lungs and a single liver. According to staff at Ho Chi Minh City children's hospital she is healthy and doing well.

The exact numbers of those who have suffered is not known, but some estimates put the number of children born with deformities since the 1960s as high as 500,000.

Vietnam has embarked on a massive campaign of reforestation, every child plants a tree, every village a forest. The effect of Agent Orange was to leave a landscape devoid of anything living. The reforestation programme is slowly restoring the countryside, birds the Vietnamese thought they would never see unless they crossed the border to Laos, cranes, ibises and the rare milky stork are slowly starting to return. In the five years following the American defeat, five million hectares of poisoned land has been reclaimed. In 1997, 250,000 ha of new forest was planted.

The Vietnamese surprisingly bear no animosity to the US aggressors and their allies who destroyed their country. The aggressors were the victims, it was the US who slunk away completely demoralised with their tails between their legs. Noam Chomsky has always taken a different view, the Vietnamese may have won the war, but their country was defeated. The Americans achieved their objectives by destroying a country that dared demonstrate a different political system than that which the US wished to impose on the world. Vietnam is now

once again being destroyed by US Imperialism as the vanguard of US transnational corporations move in to mop up what little is left. All done in the name of the new imperialism, globalisation.

Vietnam is a poor country, even a rich country would be overwhelmed by the environmental and genetic catastrophe Vietnam is having to face. Requests for scholarships are refused by the West. In the most of the hospitals American equipment pre-dating the war is now useless. The Vietnam Red Cross has launched Agent Orange Special Appeal in an attempt to raise money in the West.

At a time when US tobacco corporations have been forced to pay billions of dollars in the US to compensate the victims of smoking, it would seem only reasonable that Monsanto be forced to pay billions to the Vietnamese for the catastrophe Monsanto has wrought on their country.

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