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FEATURE-Vietnam, U.S. set new tone on dioxin war legacy

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Vietnamese Cao Thi Phuong Lan (L), 6, a victim of dioxin poisoning, is assisted by a health worker as he sits on a chair at the Peace Village in Ho Chi Minh City September 15, 2006. Brain-damaged babies and children with shortened limbs and other physical deformities are still being brought to hospitals for specialized care, four decades after the United States sprayed Vietnam with the highly toxic defoliant. Picture taken September 15, 2006. To match feature VIETNAM DIOXIN
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Vietnamese victims of dioxin poisoning, code-named "agent orange", lie in their cribs at the Peace Village in Ho Chi Minh City September 15, 2006. Brain-damaged babies and children with shortened limbs and other physical deformities are still being brought to hospitals for specialized care, four decades after the United States sprayed Vietnam with the highly toxic defoliant. Picture taken on September 15, 2006. To match feature VIETNAM DIOXIN
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Vietnamese Nguyen Minh Loc, 13, a victim of dioxin poisoning code-named "agent orange", writes at the Peace Village in Ho Chi Minh City September 15, 2006. Brain-damaged babies and children with shortened limbs and other physical deformities are still being brought to hospitals for specialized care, four decades after the United States sprayed Vietnam with the highly toxic defoliant. Picture taken September 15, 2006. To match feature VIETNAM DIOXIN
REUTERS/KHAM

By Grant McCool

BIEN HOA, Vietnam, Oct 2 (Reuters) - Doctors warn people living near the Bien Hoa military airport not to drink the water, eat the fish or grow fruit and vegetables because of wartime dioxin poisoning.

Brain-damaged babies and children with shortened limbs and other physical deformities are still being brought to hospitals for specialised care, four decades after the United States sprayed Vietnam with the highly toxic defoliant.

In recent months, Vietnam and the United States have started to overcome years of frustration in both governments about how to deal with environmental and health effects of the poison code-named "agent orange".

Americans and Vietnamese say they are perhaps just months from planning environmental clean-up and containment of dioxin, beginning at the former U.S. air base in the central city of Danang.

"Assisting Vietnam with this issue will help clear the conscience of the U.S. government," said Le Ke Son, director of "The Committee 33" working on impacts of an estimated 70 million litres of toxic chemicals used from 1961 to 1971 by the U.S. military and the South Vietnam government it supported.

The war ended on April 30, 1975 when communist North Vietnam took Saigon, re-named it Ho Chi Minh City, and unified the Southeast Asian country.

Hanoi and Washington restored diplomatic ties in 1995 and they are now cementing a friendship founded on growing trade and business ties as Vietnam introduces market reforms.

But the consequences of the toxic war remain a painful sore in the relationship that both governments and non-governmental organisations dearly wish to repair.

"There has been a lot of work on the issue," said Michael Marine, U.S. ambassador to Hanoi. "The question is very complex. What you do is in part driven by how you intend to use the site, the land, the cost for the clean-up."

HOT SPOTS

Scientists identify coastal Danang, Vietnam's fourth largest city with about 1 million people, the south-central town of Phu Cat in Binh Dinh province and Bien Hoa in the southern province of Dong Nai as "hot spots", wartime bases where the chemicals were stored and spilled.

Bien Hoa is a bustling city of 500,000 people about 40 km (25 miles) north of Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam's industrial heart.

It is a typical Vietnamese city, teeming with motorbikes, construction sites and Internet cafes alongside displays of communist hammer and sickle symbols and party slogans.

But its military airport and surrounding lakes, ponds and land are toxic. The Vietnam military plans to clean up the site.

A study by Vietnamese and Canadian scientists of Hatfield environmental consultants in West Vancouver, British Columbia, measured dioxin levels in the soil that are hundreds of times higher than is acceptable in other countries.

"My dream is to conclude work on these hot spots in the next five years," said Son, a scientist at the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment who serves on a joint Vietnam-U.S. panel of technical experts who met for the first time in June.

Washington has ruled out paying compensation but is willing to share technical advice with Vietnamese counterparts.

The non-governmental Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation provides expertise and the Ford Foundation, a U.S. philanthropic group, has made grants for environmental and health research.

"Part of the reason we are making these grants is so that they can develop a more accurate view of the nature of the threat," says Charles Bailey, Ford Foundation representative in Vietnam.

BUSH VISIT The subject could come up when U.S. President George W. Bush visits in November for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum summit.

But the issue is also legally sensitive because a Vietnamese victims group is suing 37 American chemical companies in a U.S. federal court. The class action lawsuit was thrown out in March 2005 and the group is appealing the ruling.

Americans, Australians, New Zealanders and South Koreans who served in the war were also exposed to dioxin. They have all had some success in obtaining services and care for themselves.

It is only with increasing economic prosperity that poor, under-developed Vietnam has sought to improve assistance to Vietnamese victims and to try to find out how many there are.

Children of people exposed to dioxin during the war have also been sickened or deformed, but researchers say no one can yet accurately quantify the total number of victims. The National Academy of Sciences in the United States found that up to 4.8 million people "would have been present" during spraying.

In another recent development, the United Nations has become involved for the first time.

The United Nations Development Programme in Hanoi proposes the establishment of a transparently governed trust fund where international donors, companies and governments could put money for dioxin-related environmental and health work.

"The stars really are aligned. I think we are getting there," says Koos Neefjes, senior advisor at UNDP in Vietnam.

DOCTORS AND VICTIMS

The doctors who work daily with the victims or live with environmental and health impacts welcome the progress being made towards reducing contamination and eventually ridding the country of dioxin.

"I don't hold any grudges or anger and I am of a view of letting the past go and if we can do something now then we should do what we can to help," said Nguyen Thi Phuong Tan, head of the "Peace Village" for the disabled in Ho Chi Minh City, one of 12 nationwide.

Every day, Tan and her staff of doctors and nurses provide care to 339 patients from infancy to 25 years old. They include children with enlarged heads or shortened limbs and one with skin covering the face where there should be eyes.

Some of the patients lie in a vegetative state in cots, others are teenagers reading and writing and wrestling playfully with students who come to visit the hospital.

The doctor's "let bygones be bygones" attitude is typical of Vietnamese, who are known for being pragmatic.

Even in Bien Hoa, where toxicity levels are highest and health authorities say there are 465 people with dioxin-related disabilities or illnesses such as cancer, a doctor speaks in a matter-of-fact way about the calamity.

"We have a few solutions, including warning residents against using the water from ponds and lakes near the airport," said Tu Thanh Chuong, director of Dong Nai province health department. "We told people not to eat fish from this area and we banned the production of fruit and vegetables in the contaminated land." (Additional reporting by Nguyen Nhat Lam and Nguyen Van Vinh)

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