

# VICTIMS OF AGENT ORANGE/DIOXIN

## *The Expectations*

LE THI NHAM TUYET

*Editor's Note.* The US war in Vietnam is one of the most atrocious wars in the history of mankind. Its consequences, particularly Agent Orange/dioxin will affect many generations. The gunshots of the war stopped more than 30 years ago, yet tears of sufferings continue to be shed by families - victims of the deadly chemical.

To help relieve the pain, it is necessary to point out the damaging effects of Agent Orange/dioxin suffered by the victims so that the society has information and shares with them. But what is more urgent is to demand the American chemical companies hold responsible for their supplies of toxic chemicals sprayed in South Vietnam in 10 years from 1961-1971. To contribute to this common mission, the Anthropology Review, in collaboration with the Research Centre on Gender, Family and Environment in Development (CGFED) publish a special issue on **Victims of Agent Orange/dioxin in Vietnam**. The paper by Le Thi Nham Tuyet will provide reasons for holding an international scientific conference entitled "Victims of Agent Orange/dioxin in Vietnam – Expectations"\* and the context, objectives, approach and contents of related research studies whose results are published in this Special Issue.

To respond to the appeal made by participants at the international conference on the defoliant/dioxin held in France in March 2005 to make clear the harmful effects of Agent Orange/dioxin sprayed by American army during the Vietnam war and to contribute to the struggle for justice, human rights and peace of the world today and tomorrow, CGFED has continued to carry out researching humanitarian view and to take the initiative in organizing an international conference to show the lasting consequences in all social, economic, cultural and psychological fields that the victims and their families have to suffer and their needs to be met. We have discussed with our colleagues who have been working with us for several years<sup>1</sup> to deploy a research program and organize a

conference entitled "Victims of Agent Orange/dioxin in Vietnam – The Expectations". During the process of shaping this idea, one day I met Mrs. Nguyen Thi Binh, former Deputy President of the SR of Vietnam, who has devoted her whole life to the cause of peace and development and women's emancipation. She told me: "Try to conduct research on really concrete things that respond to the needs of the victims!". I clearly understand that the victims' desire should be recognised from their concrete situation in all spheres of their life. Therefore, our research this time should be different from previous ones, bringing one more mission.

On our ten-thousand-mile way of seeking, selecting and making contact with the victims – of course different from the previous times, in this research trip the selected victims were people, who have been undergone blood testing

\* International Scientific Conference "Victims of Agent Orange/dioxin in Vietnam — The Expectations", organized by CGFED in Hanoi on 16 - 17 March 2006.

<sup>1</sup> Annika Johansson-Sweden and Jacques Maitre-France.

of dioxin level - we met a professor<sup>2</sup> of history, a People's teacher, an old and experienced revolutionary, a theoretician on history and culture of Vietnam. He asked us "Where do you go?". When learning that we went "study on the harmful effects of Agent Orange/dioxin", he just said briefly: "No theory needed regarding Agent Orange! Just need evidences on real persons and real facts!"

However, we carry the research and organise this conference not only because of that reason but also because of Norman Morrison and many other living torch who fought against the war; because of many friends of ours, such as Frederic Whitehurst<sup>3</sup>, who joined the US army as a volunteer, joined the war that was started with the lie, believing wrongly that he was fighting for the freedom on a far-away land, but seeing inhuman behaviours US Army soldiers, right in the battlefield, he turned his gun to his army fellow to prevent him from raping a Vietnamese girl; also because of many other veterans who joined the army for similar reasons, who died or became ill, suffering from diseases due to toxic contamination and now living with their family members, withstanding stinging pain days and nights.

We should not disappoint Jordan Ryan, the former representative of the UNDP, serving two terms of work in Vietnam, as well as other "not-quiet Americans" just like him, who always think about Vietnam and cannot control their sentiment about "the time when dark cloud was covering the land of Vietnam, the time of losses,

sorrows and tears of so many people who are victims of the fearful technology that created a terrible destruction; how many children disabled by the vestige of Agent Orange/dioxin there are, while the technology could be used for good things". Therefore, he himself and so many others, like him, "present here to love other lives and to go to poor people who lack fortune that others have".<sup>4</sup>

We also should always remember the Vietnamese scientists, such as Prof. Le Cao Dai and his colleagues both in-country and abroad, who show profound concern about the victims of AO/dioxin, and what to do to avoid disaster of warfare in general and chemical warfare in particular. Their scientific work have been saved and continued by us.

Thus, the reason for continuing the study and organising this conference, in order to analyse the aftermaths of Agent Orange/dioxin for the Vietnamese society and to reflect the expectations and the concrete needs of the AO/dioxin victims, is not simply to target to a fair dialog on the so-called obligation!

An American friend of mine, a PhD of sociology, former university professor in the United States<sup>5</sup>, used to write : "Today in Vietnam is the day of offering rice soup for forsaken spirits, so certainly American soldiers, who died in Vietnam, would also have rice-soup with others". Right at the time when Vietnam was under embargo, mentioning POW and MIA, she said that she did not believe that there were living POWs and MIAs in Vietnam, she did, however, "believe that there are many suffering

<sup>2</sup> Mr. Tran Van Giau, professor

<sup>3</sup> American infantryman, belonging B company, battalion 5, brigade 198, division 23, who has kept the agenda of the female battlefield medical doctor for 35 years and having tormented with remorse from that one .

<sup>4</sup> According to Jordan Ryan's article on Tien Phong daily on 15 Dec 2005, while finishing his term of office in Viet Nam to move and work in Liberyon.

<sup>5</sup> Kristin Pelzer.

souls, both living and dead, and that this is a problem which needs to be addressed and resolved". She considers the Call to Wandering Souls "a call for deeper understanding of the MIA issue". In his poem 'Call to Wandering Souls', Nguyen Du, the Vietnamese poet well-known for his humaneness, addressed all helpless and lonely souls, from intellectuals to labourers, from soldiers to beggars, from robbers to heroes, from rich to poor, to all people of different ethnic, cultural, political and geographical belonging! And there is nothing called "fairness in terms of obligation"? Vietnamese people always offer rice soup annually on Mid July in lunar calendar to "Your abandoned souls roam in strange lands! No incense burn for you. High class and low, scholars and illiterates. You wander, helpless, in the night"; and to the soldiers who "Thousands were killed for the glory of one man. Then came defeat and the battlefield was strewn with corpses. The unclaimed bones lie somewhere in a far - away land. The rain lashes down and the wind howls. Who will now evoke their memory?"

In order not to make everyone think this ritual of Vietnamese people too strange and too special, I would like to remind about a story that occurred during the last tsunami about a little baby rhinoceros Owen which was wiped away by the great wave and saved by the fishermen. He was sent to the zoo and was fed together with a turtle Mzee aged 130 years old. From keeping distance to getting closer, after a certain time, the two animals became acquainted and love each other as grand father and grand son, always being in company, not a step away<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> According to the photographer Peter Grente, author of the photo grand-father and grand-son Owen and

About this phenomenon, some scientists say that we will never know whether the old turtle and little rhino boy have thoughts or not in their mind.<sup>7</sup> I am re-telling this story at the same time with rice-soup offering ritual in Vietnam in order to reflect on whether the research on needs and how to respond to those needs of Vietnamese AO/dioxin victims, is done with "emotion" or "obligation", the two opinions that we cannot help mentioning because of the mock made by the American chemical company when saying: "The verdict of judge Weinstein is correct" "it is a very important message for many people to understand because there are too much emotion in cases as such!"<sup>8</sup>

It is true that "the Vietnamese victims of Agent Orange have been forgotten too long!". That is the words of Mrs. Susan Hammond, deputy director of the Fund for Reconciliation and Development (FFRD), who has given active assistance to bring a suit against the American chemical companies (also very active in seeking budget for continuing research and opening this conference). The existing post-war problem in Vietnam is not only the 4,8 million of victims of Agent Orange/dioxin<sup>9</sup> but also the emerging victims of the third generation, the environment containing toxic substances and bombs and dynamites of delayed explosion that potentially cause daily death, the missing people who are still reminded on the program "Messages to look for fellows" run by the Voice of Vietnam and

Mzee. Tuoi tre Chu nhat (Youth Sunday) Newspaper, 01.Jan .2006.

<sup>7</sup> Tuoi tre Chu nhat (Youth Sunday) Newspaper, 01.Jan .2006

<sup>8</sup> The speaker of the American chemical company Monsanto Glynn Young. Tuoi tre (Youth) Newspaper, 12 Mar 2005.

the Vietnam Television for more than 30 years with endless expectation, excitement and hope.

Merle Ratner, an American woman who has been involved in the movement of protestation against the war in Vietnam since she was 13 years old now establishes the “*Mobilizing campaign for help and responsibility towards victims of Agent Orange in Vietnam*” and is actively working with Vietnam Association of Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin (VAVA). Right after Weinstein refused the law-suit brought by the victims of Agent Orange in Vietnam, she said: “*The survivors of the chemical war done by the Government of the United States have been waiting too long for justice-more than 30 years!*”; “*If the legal system of the USA failed to bring equity, the American people will do it*”<sup>10</sup>. In fact, Vietnam has walked out of the war since over 30 years and more than 40 years have been passed since 1962 when the operation of spreading of Agent Orange/dioxin was begun on a large scale covering provinces from the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel downward. Numerous direct victims of Agent Orange/dioxin have passed away; mothers and wives of the “*villages of orange chemicals*” have followed their sons or their husbands after fostering the hopes and expectations without fatigue for all their lives and finally they must suffer a sad farewell with their off springs of the third generation.

This conference also bear a mission to fulfill the vital expectations of the Red Cross organizations and Agent Orange victim’s associations not only in our research sites but all over the country, also including places where

there are the victims who used to take part in the war.

Even it is late, if it is not yet accomplished, we need to continue! We have been urged to organise this conference by all reasons mentioned above!

However, I would like to ask you firstly, to consider this conference as a burning stick of incense in remembrance of the victims of Vietnam and other countries, those who died because of the chemical war carried out by the US in Vietnam and in remembrance of the living torches who had given their lives against this war; it is the same as we place a flower, a candle at the Mall in Constitution Garden of Washington D.C.; secondly, to consider this conference as our gratitude to all those who have devoted and will devote their concerns to the study and support the victim’s ! A burning stick of incense, a flower, a candle and a thankful heart of us – CGFED, in this case, is considered not only “*emotion*” but “*obligation*”.

Finally, we would like to thank sincerely the participants for your heart and efforts for the sake of the victims, who have been suffering most long-lasting, most severe consequences of Agent Orange/dioxin, please receive our profound gratitude.



<sup>10</sup> Nong thon ngay nay (Rural Today) Newspaper 14.March.2005.