

CENTRAL HIGHLANDS ETHNIC MINORITIES VICTIMS OF AGENT ORANGE/ DIOXIN

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Even though the US chemical warfare in Vietnam has been ended for 30 years, it continues to leave great and long-term consequences on the environment, ecology and health of the Vietnamese people in general and the ethnic minority groups in the Central Highlands in particular. This paper discusses serious consequences of the chemical warfare on the ethnic minority groups in the Central Highlands and proposes some solutions to help relieve difficulties for the victims in their lives.

1. Overview of history, geography and population in the Central Highlands

The Central Highlands comprises five provinces - Lam Dong, Dak Lak, Dak Nong, Gia Lai and Kon Tum. It has a natural land area of nearly 54,460 km² (accounting for one sixth of the country's area), in which forestland accounts for 25.6% of the country's total forestland area (about 3 million ha)(1). In 1989, the Central Highlands was inhabited by 37 ethnic groups and in 1999 the figure was 47, and now the Central Highlands is the region having the largest number of ethnic groups in the country (2).

The Central Highlands is a the region of typical cultures, preserving many ancient

features and is considered the largest museum of history in terms of ethnic cultures. (3)

2. The US chemical warfare in South Vietnam (1961-1971)

In late 1950s and early 1960s, the United States intensified its deep intervention in the war in Indochina. Following the General Uprising Movement, and in face of the rapid development of the Revolution in South Vietnam, the United States worked out a plan called Staley-Taylor (June 1961) to pacify South Vietnam within 18 months and to save the collapse of the Ngo Dinh Diem Puppet Administration. Under this Plan, the US Government, with the connivance of the Ngo Dinh Diem Administration rapidly deploy the use of defoliants in the southern battlefields.

On Nov. 20, 1961, US President John Kennedy ratified the plan allowing the US army to launch the defoliation operation in the fields and mountains of South Vietnam to wipe out revolutionary forces. Ngo Dinh Diem warmly supported this plan.

US correspondent Richard Dudman once condemned the US-Puppet for using the tactics "dirty war against Vietnam" (4). The US warfare has left dreadful and long-term consequences on humans and environment in

Vietnam. Latest estimation is 2.1 to 4.8 million victims among the Vietnamese civilians living in more than 20,500 villages in the period from 1961 to 1971. They have been directly affected by US chemical sprayings or exposed to chemicals without protection. This estimation does not include the off-springs of affected parents (the second and third generation), people who later moved to live in the sprayed areas, Vietnamese and US military personnel and US allied forces (5).

The US Institute of Medicine has for the first time admitted some diseases caused by Agent Orange and released a list of such diseases in 1996 including:

- Cancers
- Multiple marrow tumours
- Double prickle
- Birth defects (without enough evidence)
- Acute and nearly acute mental diseases

- Diabetes – Grade 2
- Vertebra cracks (among children of Agent Orange affected people)

Later on, the New Jersey Committee on Agent Orange listed 13 Agent Orange–related diseases which have been recognized by US Science agencies. (6).

The US chemical warfare is really a cruel and inhumane experiment. It has made 3 million Vietnamese people die slowly of defects and their children drag out a miserable existence with dozens of serious ailments.

3. Tragic consequences of the US chemical warfare left on the ethnic minority groups in the Central Highlands.

During the war of resistance against the US, the Central Highlands Front was also called Battlefront B3, comprising the provinces of Kon Tum, Gia Lai, Dak Lak and Phu Bon.

Table 1: Amount of dioxin contained in the chemicals sprayed by the US in South Vietnam
(Unit: kg) (7)

Year	Tactic Region 1	Tactic Region 2	Tactic Region 3	Tactic Region 4	Total
1961	?	?	?	?	?
1962	-	-	0.1	-	0.2
1963	0.2	0.2	0.6	0.1	1.1
1964	0.6	0.8	1.9	0.3	3.6
1965	1.2	1.4	3.6	0.6	6.8
1966	4.1	5.1	12.9	2.2	24.4
1967	7.7	9.6	24.1	4.1	45.5
1968	5.8	7.1	18	3.1	33.9
1969	8.1	10	25.1	4.3	47.4
1970	1.2	1.5	3.7	0.6	6.9
Total	28.9	35.7	90.1	15.3	170

The above statistics from Westing show that the amount of dioxin in the defoliants sprayed by the US in South Nam Vietnam and Tactical Region 2 (the area covering the Central Highlands) is great.

Within two years (1962-1963), using different types of weapons including toxic chemicals, the US-Diem Administration killed 382 persons, injured 247 others, tortured and detained 2390 persons, burned down 88 villages, 1201 dwelling houses and 2 Catholic churches.

In the first 8 months of 1964 alone, the enemy launched 357 major mopping operations and 6 chemical spraying missions, killing 213 persons and causing bloody disasters in the Central Highlands (8).

In late 1964, the US-Puppet army intensified the war using airplanes, tanks, chemicals and Napalm bombs, destructing hundreds of villages of the ethnic minority groups to herd them into concentration camps (villages such as Konghorinh, Mang Buk, B' Nghor Datrang etc.) and strategic camps around sub-military areas, along strategic transport roads (Road 7, 11,14, 20, 21 etc.), in mountainous district towns and provincial towns in an attempt to separate the population from the Revolutionary forces and turn them into protective belts for them. The US often used chemical artillery and C123 aircraft to spray defoliants to destroy crops in the areas inhabited by ethnic minority groups. Hundreds of villages in Lam Dong, Tuyen Duc were

destroyed by Napalm bombs, 10,000 houses of ethnic minorities were burnt down, and 22,000 tons of food were looted. Curang Gia village along Highway 8 and Bo Sa Village on Highway 20 were bombed four times in three days (from May 5 to May 7, 1965), killing and injuring 63 ethnic minority villagers (9).

In 1968-1969, the US-Puppet forces deployed operations such as "Counter-Attack", "Find and Kill", "Scoop to Concentrate People", using B52s to drop carpet bombing and spray toxic chemicals to destroy the living environment of the people in the Central Highlands. After gathering about 10,000 Xedang people into a concentration camp in Konghorinh, on Feb. 22, 1969, the US dropped bombs on the camp, massacring 350 persons and injuring thousands of others. The ethnic minority people in the Central Highlands considered "the US cruller than wild animals" who turned their vast fertile central highlands region into an exhausted land using bombs and chemicals.

In 1969, the American Association for the Advancement of Science sent four scientists including M. Meselon, John D. Constable, A. Westing and Robert E. Cook to Vietnam to study the effects left on ecology and humans by the US use of a large amount of defoliants. In his report, M. Meselon gave a summary on the disasters linked to defoliation. He acknowledged the destruction of most of the tropical forests and plants leading to starvation of civilians, particularly local ethnic groups in

the Central Highlands. The report also mentions major health risks (miscarriage, birth defects, cancers) relating to the presence of dioxin in defoliants (10).

The war was fierce with chemical sprays on Central Highlands areas such as Dak-To... in addition to the frenzied activities of FULRO – whose forerunner was Bajaraka. FULRO (Front unifié de la libération des races opprimées – *Unity Front for Liberation of Oppressed People*), established on June 25, 1965 in Phnom Penh was a counter-revolutionary organization which from 1965 to 1969 conducted frenzied activities under the motto “Wipe out the Kinh” and implemented the Program “Land Reclamation to establish villages”. From 1972 to 1973, the Saigon Puppet Administration gathered 14,265 households from the Central coast to 17

concentration camps in the Central Highlands under the Program “War Victims Camps” (11).

The US-Puppet mopping operations, carpet bombing of resistance bases, napalm bombing and chemical sprayings etc. have killed civilians and destroyed environment. Chemical weapons not only massacred the ethnic minority people but also left great consequences on many generations of population living in the Central Highlands.

Although the US chemical warfare ended more than 30 years ago, it is still leaving terrible effects on the environment and ethnic minority people in the Central Highlands. The following table shows the total population and area sprayed by defoliants in the Central Highlands during the US war in Vietnam (1961-1971):

Table 2: Area in the Central Highlands sprayed by defoliants (12)

N°	Provinces	Total area (km ²)	Sprayed Area (km ²)	(%)	Total population (person)	Population living in sprayed areas (person)	(%)
1	Gialai-Kontum	25,536	3,301	13	595,906	42,000	7.0
2	Dak Lak	19,800	727	4	490,918	62,000	12.6
3	Lam Dong	9,933	720	7	396,637	52,000	13.1

The chemicals sprayed by the US have caused great damage to the ecology in the Central Highlands. For instance in Mang Giang, An Khe and Phuong Hoang Pass defoliants destroyed forests and the plant coverage where until now the plant coverage is very thin, unable to protect soil erosion. (13)

The chemical warfare has greatly affected forest resources, soil and the environment, causing serious floods and soil erosion in the Central Highlands. Dioxin has infiltrated deep into the underground soil from the water surface, preventing the plant coverage from developing and forests from protecting soil. So,

the US chemicals sprayed in the Central Highlands not only caused defoliation and destroyed forests but also damaged environment and human health.

In the Central Highlands vast region, there remain here and there toxic chemical barrels which often contain CS gas used by the US during the war to prevent the movement of the liberation army.

After many years, the chemicals contained in those barrels are still active. When the barrels become rusty, the gas is leaked out and caused suffocation and acute lung infection and in some cases death such as in Gia Lai province(14). In 2001 ethnic minority school children in EaKar District picked up a toxic chemical barrel and used it as a game to spray on each other, injuring most of the children in the class who were then hospitalized. After this incident, EaKar District (Dak Lak province) discovered and treated another 10 toxic chemical barrels left by the war (15).

The chemicals sprayed by the US in the Central Highlands have not only greatly damaged the environment but also caused great mourning and grief and affected many generations of the ethnic minority people.

According to incomplete statistics, tens of thousands of ethnic minorities and their children and grand children in the Central Highlands have been affected by Agent Orange – the most horrible consequences of the US chemical warfare. In Lam Dong province which did not witness as many chemical sprayings as other provinces, up to 1407 persons were affected by Agent Orange (16).

Through surveys on victims of toxic chemicals in the war conducted by the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, in Gia Lai (one of the provinces mostly sprayed by defoliants in Tactic Region 2), some 12,000 ethnic minority people have been affected by the chemicals (17).

Chemical sprayings in the war have left consequences on the second and third generation in the Central Highlands. According to a report of the Committee for Protection and Care of Children in Sa Nghia Commune, Sa Thay District, Kon Tum province, there were 159 premature and monstrous births, including 141 new born babies died several days after birth and 18 cases of birth defects and the most typical one is the twin Viet and Duc who are from the second generation affected by Agent Orange (18). Viet and Duc were linked together in the pelvis and shared one excreting system and three legs. They were born on Feb. 25, 1981 very weak. They have been lucky to be the first twin alive after the operation to separate them on Oct. 4, 1988 with financial assistance from Japan. Although with the most modern medical techniques and equipment, only Duc is saved and Viet is now still leading a vegetable existence in Hoa Binh (Peace) village, Tu Du Hospital.

4. Solutions and recommendations to help ethnic minority victims in the Central Highlands

Since 1975, to help overcome the war consequences, the Vietnamese Party and Government have adopted policies to narrow the gaps between the mountainous and plain

areas, sending some labourers to work at forestry enterprises, State farms and new economic zones in the Central Highlands.

The local authorities at all levels have implemented many policies to help ethnic minority groups in the Central Highlands to improve their living standards and relieve their sufferings and consequences of the chemical warfare.

So, the Central Highlands is now the key economic focus of the whole country. In the 1996-1999 period, the Central Highlands witnessed the most rapid economic growth rate of 11.7% while the average rate of the country was 7% (19). However, the settlement of the consequences of the chemical warfare in the Central Highlands remains the issue of interdisciplinary sciences and a sensitive socio-political issue.

For the Agent Orange victims who are ethnic minority in the Central Highlands, it is very difficult and complicated to classify them by testing at present. But based on the residential sites of the ethnic minority groups sprayed by US chemicals and time and space and the concentration of dioxin, we can initially identify those who have been exposed to toxic chemicals.

The Vietnamese Party and State have implemented important socio-economic development programs in the Central Highlands such as construction of the Yali and Thac Mo Hydro-electric power plants, the healthcare program for ethnic minority people, Program 135 to help poor communes build infrastructure, and poverty reduction program. The Truong Son Road linking Da Nang City and Kon Tum, Gia Lai, Buon Ma Thuot (Dak

Lak), Dak Nong and the southern provinces has helped the Central Highlands population to improve their economic and cultural exchanges. At present, 100% of communes in the Central Highlands provinces have access to motor roads to the commune headquarters, 97% of villages have access to electricity and 100% of communes have health stations (20). These are correct policies to help ethnic minority people in general and victims of toxic chemicals in the Central Highlands in particular to stabilize their lives and integrate into community. At present, the State and local authorities are implementing a policy providing the victims with regular allowances to help them survive and overcome their life-threatening difficulties.

In August and September, 2002, the Fund in Support of Agent Orange Victims, in coordination with Military Hospital 108 conducted free of charge orthopedic operations on 143 poor handicapped people and Agent Orange victims in the provinces of Tay Ninh, Gia Lai and Kon Tum. The pre- and post-operation care for these patients was very difficult and costly. Many ethnic minority patients who were not used to staying in the hospital, felt home sick and feared of pain left the hospital without knowing how to care for themselves and practice. The Red Cross officials had to visit them at their homes, explaining to them and help them.

However, the Central Highlands is unable to help all Agent Orange victims. The Fund in Support of Agent Orange Victims has so far only provided 70 wheelchairs to ethnic minority victims of Agent Orange in the

province of Gia Lai, while 450 victims in the province need wheelchairs (21).

The consequences of the chemical warfare in the Central Highlands remain serious, many problems cannot be solved by the Central Highlands itself. For example, we can provide poor ethnic minorities with money and resources, but how can we help the victims cure 12 diabolic diseases caused by Agent Orange/ dioxin? It's necessary to struggle for justice for Agent Orange victims and promote cooperation and humanitarian support. The first step was taken on November 3, 2002 when Vietnam and the United States signed a memorandum of understanding on cooperation in scientific research on the effects of dioxin on human and environment (22). This is because many dioxin-related diseases have not yet been identified scientifically and treated, the victims still have to wait while their lives are counting by days.

Some recommendations

1. Areas of chemical warfare vestiges and long-term research areas should be marked off to study the effects of toxic chemicals on forests and environment in the Central Highlands and the most typical area is in Sa Thay, Kon Tum province.

2. Communication should be provided widely to the ethnic minority people in the Central Highlands to give up superstitious concept that malformation and birth defects by toxic chemicals are because of the guilt committed by the former generation and eliminate complex and discrimination against handicapped children.

3. The movement in support of victims of toxic chemicals in the Central Highlands should be expanded further and receive more international support without any political conditions and contributions from kind-hearted people. Helping Agent Orange victims must become conscience and responsibility of the whole society.

4. The consequences of the chemical warfare are great and need support and cooperation from the international community in terms of scientific research and finance. It is urgent to expand international cooperation in the research studies on dioxin, in cleaning up the environment and in overcoming the consequences of toxic chemicals as this needs scientific and technological advances and much funding of which we are unable to afford.

5. International cooperation will help improve the results of our scientific research and make full use of international public support in the struggle for justice and urging the US chemical companies and Government to be responsible for the victims of chemical warfare in Vietnam.

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