

## THE EXTREME PAIN OF THE WAR REMAINS

BICH THUAN

The resistance war against American aggressors of the Vietnamese people has ended for one third of a century. New life is being built on beautiful and hospitable Vietnam. New houses have sprung up, new construction projects have been built and children are going to school in a jubilant atmosphere.

But here and there, behind green bamboo groves or under simple roofs, war veterans are still silently suffering the aftermaths of war.

I had a chance to visit a poor rural village in Phu Tho Province where mothers who sent their sons to the front and welcomed them home without being injured. Many young women welcomed their lovers back from the battlefields. But their joy lasted very short when they witnessed their dear ones distorted after a spell of high fever with red and easily breakable skin. That's not all. The wife of a demobilized soldier, in her pregnancy was filled with hope, waiting for the child to be born. After 9 months and 10 days, her child was born with curled up limbs, shrunk chest and buttock and died right after birth. The young mother was so desperate that she left the man. The war veteran lost all his happiness because if he remarries to the second or third wife, they will continue to have monstrous births.

I visited a woman farmer in a rural village in Ha Tay province. In a small house, the 40-year old mother was feeding food to her 18-year old daughter. The girl is very small, sitting in a

plastic chair, with her hands cramped and her eyes blank. Her mother told me: *"She is sitting here all day. She cannot take anything with her hands, thus either mother or father has to feed food to her. We also have to take bath for her. In the evening, if she does not take several tablets of amnadin, she cannot sleep, screaming and being awake for the whole night. Therefore, though we are facing great difficulties we have to buy those tablets for her. Whenever I had money, I took her to doctors and medical practitioners to treat her. But her illness has not been relieved. I think it's our fate. The war consequences have been left on whatever family, that family has to burden them."*



A victim of Agent Orange in Hai Chau district, Da Nang city

Photo: Khong Dien

Once I visited a war veteran's family – Mr. Pham Van Thanh in Nam Dinh City. Mr. Thanh cannot do any thing now. I talked to his parents – Mr. Pham Van Coi and Mrs. Nguyen Thi Ty.

Both of them are 80 years old now. Mrs. Nguyen Thi Ty said:

*“Thanh served the army and was hit by bombs or toxic chemicals and lost his memory. He returned home without bringing back any paper or belongings, only his body and it was lucky. All the four members in our family are dependent on my husband’s small pension. Thanh’s wife has left him and their child fearing hardship. I am 80 years old now, but still have to carry this 16-year old grand child and take bath for him. Life is so hard. I feel pity for him and also for myself. Whenever I die, who will care for my grandchild.”*



**A victim of Agent Orange in Vinh Thanh district, Can Tho city**

Photo: Khong Dien

As known to everyone, dioxin is extremely poisonous. It was used to kill all plants on the ground but human bodies are not soil. Dioxin, whether in the form of powder or liquid, once infiltrate into human bodies will destroy blood cells and nerves. I visited Hoa Binh (Peace)

Village and met a girl with beautiful face but her bones are distorted and her knee joints cannot develop. She is 18 years old now but is as small as a 5-year-old child. Even if she lives for many years more, she will still be a child of five or six years of age. In Huu Nghi (Friendship) Village, there are many handicapped children. I visited a class, teacher Tran Thi Hong told me:

*“We are here days and nights with the children who we consider our children. They are between 6 to 18 years of age. Each carries some diseases. Tran Van Hoan is the son of Mr. Tran Van Khuyen who has fought in the Southern battlefield. He was affected by toxic chemicals left on him by his father. He is very weak, eats very little and when he sleeps he breathes very difficult. When he was at home, he even ate grass. The ribs on his chest press on his lung, making his chest sunken like a well. We took him to many hospitals for check ups and X rays and were told that an operation is needed to take out those ribs so that his lung can work, but the operation will cost billions of Dong. Our Village cannot afford it.”*

Ms. Nguyen Thi Oanh, a physician in charge of 20 children in the Village told me:

*“Coming here I witness all types of complicated diseases of the children. The US produced toxic chemicals as herbicide but they kill humans and the diseases are incurable. This child – Hoa is 17 years old now but she is as small as a 10-year old child. She looks like a boy, sometimes she plucks her hair and tears mosquito net and blanket. On the first day when she arrived here, she bounced her head on the floor”.*

Mr. Khai Hung, Director of the Village said:

*“Our Village tries day and night to remove Agent Orange from the children’s bodies but the result is modest. The teachers try every hour, day, month and year to take out bit by bit of poison from the children’s bodies to replace them with live germs. Overcoming all hardship and difficulties to care for the children and they sometimes deserve joy and happiness. That is the case of Hanh who only wants to sit in the dark hence the name Hanh the Dark. She could not recognize even her mother. Hanh can now approach her mother when she visits her in the Village and calls her “mummy”. The mother is so happy that tears role down her cheeks as Hanh has never before recognized her mother.”*

My friend – Writer Minh Chuyen told me that in Thai Binh, his native province, there is a mother who has to put her 18-year old daughter in custody in a cage day and night. The girl is naked. Asked why she had to put her in the cage, the mother sobbed and said:

*“If I don’t put her in the cage, she will wander in the street, climb up trees or jump into the river or pond and will die. I do not put on her clothes because she will tear them all and eat them. I cannot tell you all my hardship and suffering. I fear when I die who will care for her.”*

Millions of Vietnamese are burdening similar sufferings.

According to statistics released by the US Defense Department, between 1961 and 1971, the US army sprayed in South Vietnam, parts of Laos and Cambodia 72 million liters of chemicals, including 44 million liters of Agent Orange that contain 170kg of dioxin, a very poisonous substance causing cancers, weakening

the nerve and the immunity systems, miscarriages and birth defects...

At present, there are some 150,000 children in Vietnam suffering from birth defects. Most of them are paralytic, mental retarded, blind, deaf and dumb and deformed. Their families are too poor to afford the repair of their damaged roofs or food and medical treatment for them. Their lives which are already difficult become more difficult with their children’s illnesses. How can their parents have any rest? Their painful worry is who will care for their disadvantaged children when they pass away?

Millions of Vietnamese are facing the war consequences and extreme sufferings.

For those sufferings, we earnestly call on all of you, ladies and gentlemen, to help set up more centers to care for those children once their parents pass away and contribute to the fund to help their families boost production, run job training centers to help provide jobs for children to lead an dependent life once they can leave those villages and provide medical treatment and healthcare for these children.



**A victim of Agent Orange in Ninh Kieu district, Can Tho city**

Photo: Khong Dien