

## World

Pham Van Xong holds his son, Truc, 9, in An Trach, Vietnam. Local medical officials say Truc is a victim of the herbicide Agent Orange used by U.S. forces during the war. Vietnamese and U.S. officials last year conducted their first joint scientific research project related to Agent Orange. The more politically sensitive issues of responsibility and direct compensation for victims remain unresolved.

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TOXIC LEFTOVER OF VIETNAM WAR

### Old foes together will fight effects of Agent Orange

Communist and U.S. officials join in dioxin removal

By ANTHONY FAIOLA  
Washington Post

DA NANG, VIETNAM — For a stark reminder of the Vietnam War, people living near the airport in this central industrial city can still stroll along the old stone walls that once surrounded a U.S. military base. But Luu Thi Nguyen, a 31-year-old homemaker, needs only to look into the face of her young daughter.

Van, 5, spends her days at home, playing by herself on the concrete floor because local school officials say her appearance frightens other children. She has an oversize head and a severely deformed mouth, and her upper body is covered in a rash so severe her skin appears to have been boiled. According to Vietnamese medical authorities, she is part of a new generation of Agent Orange victims, forever scarred by the U.S.-made herbicide containing dioxin, one of the world's most toxic pollutants.

### Hot spots

For decades, the United States and Vietnam have wrangled over the question of responsibility for the U.S. military's deployment of Agent Orange. But officials say they are now moving to jointly address at least one important aspect of the spraying's aftermath — environmental damage at Vietnamese "hot spots" such as Nguyen's city, Da Nang — that are still contaminated with dioxin 31 years after the fall of Saigon.

Though neither Nguyen nor her husband was exposed to the Agent Orange sprayed by U.S. forces from 1962 to 1971, officials here say they believe the couple genetically passed on dioxin's side effects after eating fish from contaminated canals. "I am not interested in blaming anyone at this point," the soft-spoken Nguyen said on a recent day, stroking her daughter's face. "But the contamination should not keep doing this to our children. It must be cleaned up."

Vietnamese and U.S. officials last year conducted their first joint scientific research project related to Agent Orange. Testing of the soil near Da Nang's airport, where farmers say they have been unable to grow rice or fruit trees for decades, showed dioxin levels there as much as 100 times above acceptable international standards.

Now the United States is planning to co-fund a project to remove massive amounts of the chemical from the soil. A senior U.S. official involved in Vietnam policy said the plan is evidence that the two countries, having embarked on a new era of economic cooperation, are finally collaborating to address the problem.

"The need to deal with environmental cleanup is increasingly clear, and we're moving forward from talking to taking concrete actions to respond to the issue," the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The more politically sensitive issues of responsibility and direct compensation for victims remain unresolved. Although medical authorities here estimate that there are more than 4 million suspected dioxin victims in Vietnam, the United States maintains that there are no conclusive scientific links between Agent Orange and the severe health problems and birth defects that the Vietnamese attribute to dioxin.

### Steps to reconciliation

Still, with a much-changed Vietnam now among Asia's most dynamic economies, both sides appear more willing to seek common ground. Ahead of President Bush's first official visit to Vietnam this week, some also express hope that they are taking the first steps toward a reconciliation on their most divisive wartime issue.

During the war, American forces sprayed about 12 million gallons of Agent Orange over Vietnam. It defoliated countless trees in areas where the communist North Vietnamese troops hid supply lines and conducted guerrilla warfare.

Because Vietnam lacked the resources to conduct its own environmental cleanup, dioxin-related birth defects have been diagnosed in thousands of children whose parents were not exposed during the war. In many cases, families such as the Nguyens were not warned of the hazard until it was too late.


After doctors told them their daughter, Van, was a dioxin victim, the Nguyens cemented over the small garden in their front yard and stopped eating fish from nearby canals. Even now, however, many of their neighbors remain unaware of the danger.

Vietnamese officials estimate the cost of cleaning up the country's three worst hot spots — including the area near the old U.S. military base in Da Nang that is now the city's main airport — will be as much as \$60 million. Before year's end, they hope to launch the first phase, the development of a plan for cleanup and land use in the city, with an initial contribution of about \$300,000 from the U.S. government.

### Apparent momentum

That kind of cooperation has appeared to give new momentum to the issue on other fronts. On Thursday, the Ford Foundation announced that it is putting \$2.2 million toward projects related to Agent Orange. The United Nations Development Program is also set to piggyback with a major grant in coming weeks.



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