HỘI NẠN NHÂN CHẤT ĐỘC DA CAM VIỆT NAM
VIETNAM ASSOCIATION OF VICTIMS OF AGENT ORANGE/DIOXIN

▪ 35 Hồ Mễ Trì Street ▪ Nhân Chính ▪ Thanh Xuân ▪ Hà Nội ▪ Việt Nam ▪
▪ Tel. +84 4 62 65 26 42 ▪ Fax +84 4 62 65 26 43 ▪ http://www.vava.org.vn ▪

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ASIA, THE PACIFIC AND THE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT

Agent Orange in Vietnam: Recent Developments in Remediation

Testimony of Ms. Tran Thi Hoan
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The subject of this hearing is to understand the needs of the victims of Agent Orange. I would like to contribute to this discussion because I am one of those victims. I would like to share my personal experience with you today. But my experience is not unique. I am one of hundreds of thousands of young people whose lives have been marked by our parents or grandparents exposure to Agent Orange.

I was born, as you see me, without two legs and missing a hand. I was born on December 16, 1986 into a farming family in Đức Linh district of Bình Thuận province in Central Vietnam. My mother was exposed to Agent Orange earlier when she was farming her plot of land which turned out to have Agent Orange canisters buried in the soil. My older sisters and my older brother were born without any problems, but my younger brother was still born in 1988, due to an abdominal wall deformity.

When I was young, it was difficult for me to play with the other children, or attend school because, at that time, people didn't understand about Agent Orange. They thought that my condition was a result of bad karma in my family.

When I was 8 years old, I met a local journalist who suggested I go to Từ Dũ Hospital in Ho Chi Minh City so that I could get better care and an education. With my parents' encouragement, I moved to Peace Village II, the Agent Orange center at Từ Dũ Hospital.

Since then I have been living in Peace Village II. I share the ward with 60 children suffering from the effects of Agent Orange. Let me tell you about some my friends who share my home. They suffer from spina bifida, congenital limb deformity, multijoint stiffness, different types of syndromes, microcephalae, hydrocephalus, cerebral palsy, etc. I also know others such as Phạm Thị Thuý Dung (pronounced, Zung), is 16 years old and Phạm Thị Linh Nhi, her younger sister, 14, and their sufferings, but I do not know how they are classified. Dung was born in Bình Thuận province, 48 inches in height, 53 pounds in weight, bed ridden. She cannot speak. She gets sick when there is a change in temperature. Linh Nhi is 64 pounds, and 49 inches tall, she sleeps most of the time, and suffers from nutritional deficiency. Little Phạm Thị Thuỳ Linh,

born 1994 without arms, now lives in Peace Village II. She writes with her toes. Her grandpa was an ARVN soldier who participated in the spraying of Agent Orange.

At Peace Village II we all live together and those of us who are able help those who are sicker. Some of my friends have died from their birth defects, like Nguyễn Thị Hạnh, born in 1997, who had multijoint stiffness, and died in 2007. Little Huỳnh Thương Hoài, born in 1996 in Củ Chi, without a left arm and without legs, had a heart defect, and suffered from epilepsy and multideformity and died in 1999 from total heart muscle failure. Victims of Agent Orange die every day, and they need immediate attention and help.

The staff at Peace Village II is loving and kind, and does their best to create a warm atmosphere for us. There are many other children who could benefit from this treatment but there is not enough room for all those children who need this kind of care. Some of the residents, like me, can go to school and work but others will lie in their beds until they eventually die. All over Vietnam there are hundreds of thousands of children like little Dung and Hạnh, who lie at home without access to the services available to those at Peace Village II.

I don't know what would have happened to me if I hadn't been able to come to Peace Village II. Without legs and a hand it would be difficult to farm, and without education, other jobs would also be out of reach.

But I was able to go to school. I am now about to graduate from the Ho Chi Minh City University of Foreign Languages and Information Technology (HUFLIT) with a certificate in computer science. In fact, I took a week away from preparing for final exams to come and testify here today!

I am considering continuing my education. I had dreamed about being a doctor but I don't know if my physical condition will allow me to do this. But I am confident that I will be able to find a way to make a contribution to my society and to continue to help other Agent Orange victims.

I am one of the lucky ones! While I am missing limbs, my mental functioning is fine. No one knows what other effects of the dioxin in Agent Orange may develop in my body. But many babies, children and young people my age live lives of quiet agony. They are trapped in bodies that do not work. Their brains remain in infancy even as their bodies grow.

Most of these children have access to much fewer medical and rehabilitative services than me. Most live with their families in farming communities like the one I grew up in. Some of their parents – the generation directly exposed to Agent Orange – are also sick with cancers. Whatever their health, most parents of seriously disabled victims are poor. Needing to provide constant care for their children, they cannot work. Many must spend money they don't have each month for medicines. Some live in substandard housing.

Our government does provide assistance to the most seriously ill victims. But our country is still developing and the assistance doesn't meet all the needs.

The organization that represents the victims, the Vietnam Association for Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin (VAVA), also assists the victims. VAVA as it is called, is building day care centers for young victims, rehabilitation centers and providing medical care and social services. I am part of the new generation of VAVA members around the country.

What do the victims need and want? We want those responsible for the terrible consequences of Agent Orange to hear our pain and then to respond as members of the human family.

The chemical manufacturers who made the Agent Orange and the U.S. government who sprayed and dumped it in our country should respond to this human tragedy by doing the right thing! It is a matter of justice and humanity!

Building more centers like Peace Village II in many regions of Vietnam is necessary, particularly for those with severe birth defects. For those who are somewhat better off, daycare centers, vocational and educational rehabilitation centers and aid to families to facilitate home care are crucial. Medical care specifically targeted to the conditions we face as well as prosthetics and other services is needed.

For our parents and grandparents exposed during the war, treatment for their cancers and other diseases is a responsibility.

A comprehensive approach will be required to meet these human health needs. Going along with this is the requirement that the toxic "hot spots" where dioxin remains in the land and water be cleaned up.

Agent Orange victims also want a say in how services for us are planned and delivered. That's why our organization, VAVA, should be central to the development of all assistance programs.

Many youth like me were born after the war. Like other young people, we dream of having a family, getting a job and having a peaceful life. But the aftermath of the war destroys the dreams of many young Agent Orange victims in Vietnam. In this 15th year of relations between Vietnam and the U.S. we ask the U.S. people and their representatives to reach out your hands in friendship and understanding.

I am aware that the children and grandchildren of U.S. veterans exposed to Agent Orange are suffering like us. We wish to share common experiences with them. We hope that they receive the medical care and assistance they need.

There is a Vietnamese saying *Ngày mai trời lại sáng* something like the American popular song, "the sun will come up tomorrow".

I hope that this hearing will be a testament to the power of hope, of dreams and of assuring justice!

Thank you!