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Vietnam Association of Victims of Agent Orange/dioxin
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**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 Dr. Nguyen Thi Ngoc Phuong
Vietnam Association of Victims of Agent Orange/dioxin

Honorable Chairman Faleomavaega, Congress members, Ladies and Gentlemen,

First, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Chairman Faleomavaega and the members of the Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific and the Global Environment for organizing this Hearing on "Agent Orange in Vietnam: Recent Developments for Remediation" I am pleased to have this opportunity to once again talk about the urgent needs of the victims of Agent Orange/dioxin and what we can do together to help them.

I am testifying today as a Vice President of the only organization that represents the millions of victims of Agent Orange in Vietnam. The Vietnam Association of Victims of Agent Orange/dioxin (or VAVA). Our Association was founded in 2003 by a handful of Agent Orange victims, many of whom have now died from their Agent Orange related illnesses. From 2003 until now, our Association has grown to over 300,000 members with chapters in 55 provinces and more than 326 districts. We advocate for the rights of those affected by Agent Orange in Vietnam and internationally. And we provide direct aid and public health and other services by and for three generations of those harmed by the dioxin in Agent Orange.

I am a physician and scientist who worked for many years at a big obstetrics-gynecology hospital in Ho Chi Minh City – Tu Du hospital where I witnessed the suffering of babies born with deformities related to Agent Orange exposure. I am now the Vice President of the Vietnam Obstetricians and Gynecologists Association.

In my position as Vice President of VAVA and as a public health expert, I see daily the effect of Agent Orange on the bodies and minds of those exposed to this deadly chemical. Their suffering is immense and acute!

I have conducted numerous studies about birth defects and cancers related to the toxic chemicals sprayed over the southern part of Vietnam during wartime. The first generation of victims, who were exposed during the war, is dying from cancers,

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complications of diabetes type 2, leukemia, multiple myeloma, Hodgkins and non Hodgkins lymphoma, and ischemic heart disease and other diseases that are recognized by the US Department of Affairs for American veterans. Like many U.S. veterans, their lives are cut short. Tragically, the toxic impact of the dioxin in Agent Orange continues in their children and grandchildren. Two and now three generations of children are being sickened and maimed -- born with severe, multi system organ disease, developmental disabilities, neurological problems, and multiple deformities of their limbs.

Other people become Agent Orange victims through environmental exposure. They live in one of the 28 "hot spots" where Agent Orange/dioxin was dumped or stored during and after the war. In these areas of my country, the water, land, fish and fowl contains much higher levels of dioxin than is acceptable by international standards. This has resulted in the systematic destruction of entire ecosystems in significant areas of Vietnam

From 1961 to 1971, more than 20 million gallons of toxic chemicals containing more than 366 kg of dioxin were sprayed over the land and people of Viet Nam. Only one billionth of a gram of dioxin can cause cancers, birth defects, miscarriages, etc. dioxin is the most toxic chemical made by humans. The spraying of these toxic agents (Agent Orange, Blue, White, Purple, Green, Pink, etc.) has devastating effects on human health and nature. It destroys the environment, and biodiversity, causing annual natural catastrophes such as flooding.

Numerous scientific studies have confirmed the association between the dioxin in Agent Orange and a range of health conditions.

Studies at a number of hospitals in Vietnam show a higher incidence of reproductive abnormalities among residents of sprayed regions in families of veterans who fought in the south, including the severe birth defects of ancephaly, hydrocephaly, cleft lip and cleft palate, spina bifida, lack of limbs. An estimated 800,000 people currently suffer serious health problems and are in need of constant medical attention. An estimated 50,000 deformed children are born to parents who were directly sprayed or were exposed through food and water. Parents exposed to Agent Orange/dioxin are 3 times more likely to have deformed children.

There has also been some progress in understanding how parents' exposure to dioxin can result in birth defects in their children and grandchildren. It is proven that, dioxin once it enters into the cell, causes damages to DNA and to genes, so that it increases the rate of cancers and other diseases, including birth defects for generations.

The Vietnamese are subject to all the diseases recognized by studies conducted on American veterans: acute and subacute peripheral neuropathy, chloracne, chronic lymphocytic leukemia, Hodgkin's Disease, Mulitple myeloma, non-Hodgkin's

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lymphoma, Prostate cancer, Respiratory cancers, Soft tissue sarcoma-acute, and Type II Diabetes mellitus. We, in Vietnam, have identified additional health care issues related to prolonged exposure over a significant period of time. Many Vietnamese people have died and continue to suffer from the same respiratory problems, cancers and diabetes which can lead to heart and circulatory problems, liver problems, ischemic heart disease and neurological problems.

The U.S. government currently awards service connected disability to U.S. veterans presumptively exposed to Agent Orange for these conditions. However, they have yet to be assisted for all of the conditions related to Agent Orange exposure. And families of U.S. veterans whose children are being born with dioxin-related birth defects, are also asking for assistance from their government. We support their efforts to gain full compensation and medical treatment for their children and grandchildren!

We are also aware that some of the more than one million people in the Vietnamese American community in the United States suffer from Agent Orange related conditions and are also in need of health care. We hope that this will be provided to them.

VAVA certainly supports continuing scientific research and studies. But the time for waiting for results while our children suffer and die is over! Our victims cannot wait any longer for the basic treatment and care that will ease their agony!

Nowhere in the world is there a population that has been so greatly exposed to Agent Orange/dioxin as the Vietnamese people. Because of their medical conditions and birth defects, the victims and their families face lives of extreme hardship and poverty. VAVA and the Vietnamese people and government are doing our best to help. VAVA in particular has 20 centers and provides direct assistance to thousands families of Agent Orange victims. But, our resources are limited and the needs are great. The victims who suffer from cancers and other Agent Orange related illnesses die every day. And daily, the youngest and most fragile victims are born with the most tragic birth defects. They cannot wait any longer for justice!

Beginning in 2002, the U.S. Congress and government began to recognize the severity of the problem and to provide some monetary assistance to Vietnam to remediate the hot spots and help the victims in Danang.

Some NGOs including the U.S. –Vietnam Dialogue Group, of which I am a member, the Ford Foundation and US veterans' groups are working to raise money for the clean up efforts and to help the victims and the disabled. Their assistance is greatly appreciated. But their resources are hardly sufficient.

Here I would like to say a word about the specificity of Agent Orange victims. We in VAVA have also been working to identify the Agent Orange victims across Vietnam.

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There is some confusion about the use of the term "disabled" with regard to these victims. While some victims become disabled, others are not. Many disabled people in Vietnam are not Agent Orange victims. Agent Orange victims are those who were directly exposed to Agent Orange/dioxin whether by being sprayed, through the "hot spots" or through their parents. While we welcome assistance for the disabled, we believe that there is a particular responsibility to those who are suffering due to the use of Agent Orange.

The American Public Health Association in its 2007 policy statement on Agent Orange recognized the responsibility of the US government and chemical companies to alleviate the harm caused by their use of Agent Orange/dioxin in recommending that,

"... the US government and involved chemical companies provide resources for the disabled... provide medical and nursing services for those harmed by Agent Orange; develop community support organizations, including health care and educational and chronic care services... for American and Vietnamese people harmed...[and] remediate or attempt to clean up those areas of in Vietnam that still contain high levels of dioxin." (APHA Policy # 20075)

Since I testified several years ago at the first hearing of this committee, there has been growing international public awareness of the need to address this urgent public health and environmental crisis. I believe that the American people, and particularly the veterans who experience the same pain, want to do the right thing! The best way to build friendship and mutual understanding on this, the 15th anniversary of relations between the U.S. and Vietnam is to deal with this legacy from our shared past.

I would like to respectfully suggest that you and your colleagues in the Congress continue the work begun by U.S. veterans and other American groups to decisively heal the wounds of war for Vietnam's more than 3 million Agent Orange victims:

1. Provide resources for comprehensive medical, rehabilitation, chronic care and educational services and facilities for Agent Orange victims;

2. Provide assistance for impoverished families and caretakers of Agent Orange victims;

3. Provide the above resources by funding Vietnamese non-governmental organizations including the Vietnam Association for Victims of Agent Orange/dioxin to engage in these activities;

4. Provide funding to remediate those areas in Vietnam that continue to contain high levels of dioxin

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5. Require the chemical companies who manufactured Agent Orange to recognize their responsibility and assist the victims.

I hope that this third hearing on Agent Orange convened by the subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific and the Global Environment will build on the testimony in the previous hearings and result in action to address the agony and the suffering the victims of Agent Orange/dioxin are experiencing daily. We look forward to your understanding and empathy. The pain of our victims is too great! Timely and effective actions by this Congress to help victims of Agent Orange/dioxin are the final step in healing the wounds of war as our two peoples and countries continue to build a relationship of friendship and peace.

Thank you.