Statement by Hon. **Mr. Ngo Quang Xuan**
Vice Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee
of the National Assembly of the S.R. of Viet Nam
Co-Chair of the U.S - Viet Nam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange/Dioxin

Before the
Subcommittee on Asia, Pacific and Global Environment
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
United States House of Representatives

For the hearing on "***Completing the Task: What Should We Do to Address the Impact of Agent Orange in Vietnam?***"

June 4, 2009

Mr. Chairman, and Members of the Subcommittee,

Ladies and Gentlemen:

First of all, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Chairman Faleomavaega and the Subcommittee for the opportunity to speak before you on our efforts to address the impact of Agent Orange/dioxin to the people and the environment of Viet Nam as well as the road ahead to complete this heavy task. I believe that following the outcomes of the first hearing of the Subcommittee on Agent Orange in May 2008, this hearing will provide more in-depth exchanges on ways and means to complete the task and will eventually lead to a legislation and other official measures that will assist Viet Nam to cope with the continuing impact of Agent Orange/dioxin in the time to come.

Today, I speak before the Subcommittee in the capacity as Co-Chair of the U.S - Viet Nam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange/Dioxin. As you may know, the Dialogue Group was set up in 2007 in the framework of track two (non-governmental) with assistance from Ford Foundation's Special Initiative on Agent Orange/Dioxin. The Dialogue Group includes five individuals from each side. The Vietnamese side includes five representatives from the National Assembly, Commission on External Relations of the Central Party's Committee, Viet Nam Veterans Association, National University in Ha Noi and University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Ho Chi Minh City. Five members on the U.S side come from Aspen Institute, the Ford Foundation, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the World Committee on Disability. I am honored to co-chair the Dialogue Group with Mr. Walter Isaacson, Former General Director of CNN communication, President and CEO of the Aspen Institute.

Viet Nam - U.S relations and the issue of Agent Orange/Dioxin

Viet Nam - U.S relations have witnessed dramatically development since the mid-1990s following political normalization. A series of bilateral summits have helped drive the improvement of ties, including President George W. Bush's visit to Hanoi in November 2006, President Nguyen Minh Triet's visit to Washington in June 2007, and Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dzung's visit to Washington in June 2008. Bilateral diplomatic engagement has

expanded at ASEAN, APEC, WTO and with Vietnam's January 2008 start of a two-year term at the UN Security Council.

Since the end of the war, major strides have been made in bilateral relations to enable the two countries to move forward on a range of issues and areas of difference. The United States has granted Vietnam permanent normal trade relations (PNTR) status and Viet Nam has become a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Following the lifting of trade embargo and the granting of PNTR status, U.S. trade with Vietnam grew rapidly. Between 2001 and 2007, total bilateral trade between the two countries rose from $1.5 billion to $12.5 billion. Viet Nam has also increased its efforts to assist the United States to recover the remains of U.S. soldiers and civilians who died during the wartime. The two nations have also expanded their cooperation on strategic and military issues.

However, one major legacy of the war that still remains unresolved is the impact of Agent Orange/dioxin on the people and the environment of Viet Nam. For the last three decades, this issue has generally been pushed aside of bilateral discussions by other issues considered more important such as the negotiations for PNTR, WTO, trade relations ... by the two sides. Having those issues resolved, the issue of Agent Orange/dioxin has emerged as a regular topic in bilateral discussions in recent years. It is said that the relations between Viet Nam and the U.S will not become totally comprehensive once Agent Orange is still the mainstay of the relationship.

The increasing concern from the Vietnamese people about the impact of Agent Orange in recent years have created more pressure on the Vietnamese government to remove dioxin from the environment and provide better care to people exposed to Agent Orange. The use of 80 million liters of herbicides, containing at least 366 kg of dioxin by U.S forces over the southern Viet Nam was the largest use of chemicals in warfare yet known to mankind.

Efforts made in the field of Agent Orange in Viet Nam

Remediation of Agent Orange/Dioxin Contaminated Areas and Environmental Restoration

Since the 1990s, several constructions have been built by Ministry of National Defense of Viet Nam to control the spread of dioxin in and around the military bases that served as hubs for Ranch Hand Operation, including three hotspots in Da Nang, Bien Hoa and Phu Cat airbases. The Ministry is currently conducting a project for isolating and land-filling an area which was heavily contaminated by dioxin in Bien Hoa airbase with the total amount of 75 billion Vietnamese Dong (or $5 million). However, this project can only deal with a part of the whole dioxin contaminated area in Bien Hoa airport. In 2006, the Vietnamese government estimated the cost for the detoxification of the Da Nang and the Bien Hoa airbases could reach $10 million. In 2008, the estimated cost for decontaminating Da Nang airbase raised to $14 million.

In 2007, several projects were carried out by Ministry of National Defense of Viet Nam to prevent the spread of dioxin from heavily contaminated area in Da Nang airbase with fund from the Ford Foundation. Similar projects are now being carried out at Phu Cat airbase with $1.5 millions funded by the Czech Republic. Mangrove-planting projects have also been carried out to

rehabilitate forests which were totally or partially destroyed by herbicides/dioxin.

Supporting victims of Agent Orange

Despite post-war difficulties, the victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin in Viet Nam have been attached with great attention from the Government of Viet Nam and its people. At present, people who have certain medical conditions are eligible to receive a disability stipend from the Agent Orange Central Payments Programme of up to 300,000 Vietnamese Dong (or $17) per month. There are now over 200,000 victims of Agent Orange receive a monthly allowance from this program with the budget of about $50 million per year. The annual cost of providing a $17 per month stipend to all of Vietnam's estimated 2.1-4.8 million victim of Agent Orange would be $360 million to $820 million.

The Government of Viet Nam also works closely with private and local agencies to provide assistance to people with medical conditions related to Agent Orange exposure. The Government also encourages and assists partial funding for NGOs operating in these areas such as Agent Orange Victims Protection Fund of the Viet Nam Red Cross or Victims of Agent Orange Association (VAVA) ect... Between 1998 and 2004, the Viet Nam Red Cross has raised 23 billion VND ($1.4 million) and 50 billion VND ($3.1 million) at local level for programs to provide aid to people who were exposed to dioxin.

Thousands of victims, especially children with birth defects, have been nurtured and treated in Hoa Binh (Peace) villages, Friendship villages and Centers for children with disabilities all over the countries. Yet, these supports only meet a small part of a very large and long-term demand of Agent Orange/Dioxin victims.

International Cooperation in research and overcoming the consequences

Scientific researches on the adverse impacts of Agent Orange to the environment of Viet Nam and its people have been conducted with collaboration and support of scientists from Japan, Germany, Canada, Russia ect... Humanitarian activities and contribution by organizations and individuals from Japan, Germany, Norway, England and the United States ... for victims of Agent Orange and people with disabilities have also been carried out in recent years. Several Peace and Friendship villages providing care and treatment for victims of Agent Orange and children with disabilities have been built and funded by international organizations such as Dsselforf Peace village and Veteran Associations of Germany, South Korea.

Cooperation between Viet Nam and the U.S in the issue of Agent Orange began in 2000 following the visit to Viet Nam by President Bill Clinton. The results, over the past few years, have shown through some modest scaled activities, including cooperation in organizing scientific seminars; helping with a dioxin analysis equipment already used; training of young staff; sampling Da Nang for dioxin analysis; providing $ 400,000 for EPA and BEM to do research for dioxin treatment in Da Nang. The total $6 million appropriation by the Congress to Viet Nam for environmental remediation of dioxin-contaminated storage sites and to support health programs in communities near those sites was made twice in 2007 and 2009. However, so far, there have been no further announcements or details about the utilization of even the first appropriation of $3 million in 2007.

Viet Nam has also received support from several U.S NGOs to address the impact of Agent Orange, including the Ford Foundation, Viet Nam Veterans of American Foundation and some American friends. At the moment, the Ford Foundation is the largest international contributor of assistance to Vietnam's efforts to clean up Agent Orange/dioxin. Through August 2008, the Ford Foundation had made grants of about $8 million to Agent Orange/Dioxin related projects in Vietnam, and had committed to grant more in the future.

The U.S - Viet Nam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange/Dioxin

In February 2007, the Dialogue Group was established with funds from the Ford Foundation. The Dialogue Group seeks to draw attention to the range of human and environment needs related to Agent Orange/Dioxin in Viet Nam and to identify practical and effective fields in which donors can help to address those needs.

In the last two years, the Dialogues Group has held four meetings. Its most recent meeting - the fourth meeting - was held just 2 days ago in June 2, 2009 in Washington D.C with the participation of around 70 people representing political community, think-tanks, NGOs and scientists. The meeting concluded with suggestions that the issue of Agent Orange/Dioxin should be put into the comprehensive U.S - Viet Nam bilateral relations and the overall environment issue in general and that advocacy to raise awareness of the U.S and fully providing information on this issue should be done in a more practical way.

Prior to the fourth meeting, the Dialogue also met in Da Nang from April 20-21, 2009 with the participation of 40 people, including representatives from all related Agent Orange organizations in Viet Nam and also representatives from Da Nang and Dong Nai - two provinces among the most heavily Agent Orange affected - to review activities of the Dialogue and work out a plan of activities for the next period.

The Dialogue Group is not a funding agency, but seeks to identify funds and donors in five priority areas:

- Containing dioxin at former airbases to prevent ongoing and future contamination: $1.2 million had been spent on the first two stages of the Da Nang clean-up joint project with Ministry of Defense of Viet Nam and the U.S Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), primarily on containment measures, including a concrete cap over the former Agent Orange loading area and fencing around a dioxin-contaminated lake downstream from the airbase.
- Expanding services to people with disabilities, with particular attention to people in and around the affected areas: Health-care, education and vocational training activities for children with disabilities have been carried out through pilot projects in Thai Binh, Da Nang and Quang Ngai
- Establishing an international standard dioxin laboratory in Viet Nam to help measure the extent of contamination and contribute to international research on Agent Orange: On May 18, 2009, The Bill & Melinda Gates and Atlantic Philanthropies Foundations donated almost $5.4 million for setting up a dioxin laboratory. The laboratory will be operated under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment.
- Restoring landscape and other aspects of the environment affected by Agent Orange during the war in Viet Nam: A training-of-trainers pilot program is being conducted by Prof. Vo Quy and the Centre for Natural Resources and Environment Studies

(CRES) in Quang Tri. So far, the programs have received positive feedback from beneficiaries and will be applied to other affected localities in the future.

- "Mainstreaming" the issue of Agent Orange within the U.S public and the U.S policy community: Several papers on Agent Orange/dioxin in Viet Nam have been published in both Viet Nam and the U.S. Cooperation with U.S dialogue partners to approach policymakers, international organizations and individuals interested in the issues and play key roles in this kind of humanitarian activity has been made.

The work of Dialogue Group has helped broadened the acknowledgement of the Agent Orange issue in both Vietnam and the United States. It has supplemented other channels in this issue such as government to government channel (Track 1) and the Viet Nam Association for Victims of Agent Orange (track 3) and served as an effective way to bridge the victims and humanitarian assistance sources.

To complete the Task ...

Since the end of the war, despite difficulties, the government and the people of Viet Nam have been active in carrying out a number of researches on the impact of Agent Orange/dioxin to its environment and people as well as provided health care and financial support for a large number of victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin. In the fight with this war legacy, Viet Nam has received valuable support and cooperation from international community.

In the last few years, cooperation between Viet Nam and the U.S on the issue of Agent Orange has achieved encouraging progress. Yet, this progress and cooperation is only on a very small scale compared with the very large, long-term and costly demands needed to complete the task. Completing the task is a long-term process which certainly requires joint efforts of both countries as well as increasingly partnership between public and private sectors. To do this, I would propose some suggestions as follow:

In the long-run:

1. The issue of Agent Orange should be put into the comprehensive U.S - Viet Nam relations: The bilateral relations between Viet Nam and the U.S can not become totally comprehensive without a comprehensive and reasonable solution for the impact of Agent Orange/Dioxin in Viet Nam. Moreover, increased U.S assistance for Vietnamese people exposed to Agent Orange/dioxin could promote the image of U.S in Viet Nam and further strengthen U.S.-Viet Nam relations.

2. A multi-year policy for cooperation should be developed

There should be a master plan or multi-year policy on Agent Orange/Dioxin in Viet Nam, including scientific research, environmental remediation, public awareness and health care. This policy could be in the form of legislation that addresses all aspects of Agent Orange in Viet Nam: research on the level of dioxin exposure, dioxin containment and remediation, and medical assistance for people exposed to dioxin. This will help identify and prioritize possible areas of cooperation in the issue of Agent Orange in the long-term as well as provide a road-map of dioxin decontamination.

In the immediate:

3. Public and private sector partnership should be further promoted: In the last few years, the private sector has been very active in the joint effects with the public sector to address the impact of Agent Orange in Viet Nam. In recent years, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have contributed most of the fund to that effort. Inside Vietnam, several Agent Orange-related organizations have been set up to raise funds via charity events. A variety of international NGOs have offered technical assistance and financial support for the provision of medical care for victims of Agent Orange. However, the demands are still at very large scale and require further cooperation.

4. Speed-up the imbursement pace: It's appreciated that the U.S Congress has twice agreed to allocate $6 million for the work of Agent Orange/dioxin in Viet Nam. However, in realities, this budget does not yet reach those who need it. The decision to add $3 millions to the Budget of 2007, 2009 is a significant move made by the US Congress. Therefore, to make this move not just a 'symbolic' one, the speed of imbursement should be soon pushed up.

5. Promote various forms of regular dialogue and information exchanges between the two side in every channel such as conference, meeting, site visits, seminars; work with mass media-newspapers, online newspapers, film-making or any activities that help raise the awareness of the people about the issue of Agent Orange/dioxin-its impact on Vietnam's environment and human health etc. What we did in Da Nang was a successful and fruitful example.

Allow me to conclude my statement by welcoming the second hearing of the Subcommittee as an important component on the long way to complete our task. Thank you again for inviting me and for convening this fruitful discussion.

END OF THE STATEMENT