

# U.S., foreign Agent Orange victims unite

By Elisabeth Schreinemacher

Special to Sentinel-Voice

UNITED NATIONS (NNPA) - Vietnamese victims of the defoliant known as Agent Orange wound up a month-long visit to the U.S. at the invitation of veterans, Vietnamese-Americans and peace activists, to press their case for reparations from the U.S. government and the companies that made the deadly chemical.

They say an estimated 50,000 deformed children have been born to parents who were directly sprayed with Agent Orange or exposed through contaminated food and water.

During the Vietnam War, the U.S. scorched up to 25 percent of the country's forests with the deadly chemicals Agent Orange, and also Agent White, Blue, Pink, Green and Purple. Agent Orange, which contained trace amounts of dioxin, disabled and sickened both soldiers and civilians.

The risk of death from cancer among men and women exposed to Agent Orange increased by 30 percent in Vietnam after the war, studies show. Today, 3 million Vietnamese and tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers still suffer the health effects of these chemicals.

To raise awareness here about their campaign, Vietnamese activists just concluded a 10-city tour, with stops in New York, Washington, Chicago and San Francisco, among others.

"I have just learned what the doctors think of my case," said Ha Thi Hai, an Agent Orange victim born in 1976 in Vietnam's Thai Binh province. "They say that Agent Orange has affected my marrow and atrophied my muscles. It is inoperable and incurable. I am going to lose little by little the use of my limbs and not be able to move."

More than 30 years after the end of the war that killed more than 58,000 U.S. soldiers and 3 million Vietnamese, U.S. veterans are demanding compensation for their Vietnamese counterparts.

U.S. veterans received partial compensation for their injuries from the U.S. government and the chemical companies that manufactured the weapons, but Vietnamese victims have not received any compensation.

From 1961 through 1971, 22 million gallons of highly toxic herbicides were sprayed over hundreds of thousands of hectares of land, mostly in

Vietnam, but also in Laos and Cambodia.

In addition to the human toll, Agent Orange devastated Vietnam's natural environment, including the wholesale destruction of mangrove forests and the long-term poisoning of soil and crops.

In 1984, seven U.S. chemical companies agreed to pay \$180 million to 291,000 people over a period of 12 years. However, the companies refused to accept liability as part of the legal settlement of the cases, claiming the science still does not prove that Agent Orange was responsible for any of the medical horrors its name has long brought to mind.

In 2004, Vietnamese victims of Agent Orange filed a new federal lawsuit against 36 U.S. chemical companies that manufactured and supplied the herbicide. The lawsuit was dismissed on Mar. 10 of this year, when a judge found the claims lacked a basis in national or international law.

The Association of Agent Orange Victims, which represents more than 3 million Vietnamese affected by the toxic herbicide, announced in September that they planned to file an appeal of the ruling.

The Vietnam Agent Orange Relief and Responsibility Campaign is supporting the lawsuit of Agent Orange victims against U.S. chemical manufacturers and is lobbying the U.S. government to provide compensation for Vietnamese Agent Orange survivors.

"We have had a tremendous amount of support," Merle Ratner, a coordinator of the Campaign, said. "We are trying to get legislation introduced within the next year or six months. We are calling on the U.S. to allocate money for Agent Orange victims in Vietnam."

"From the discussions of the people from the tour, we have heard that they are living under difficult conditions. The Vietnamese government is trying to provide help for them and in fact is giving some kind of assistance to every Agent Orange victim in the country, but this is a poor country so they can not afford that much," she said.

"We think there is a responsibility, both legally and ethically, to compensate the Agent Orange victims in Vietnam, as the U.S. has been

forced to do with the U.S. veterans."

Meanwhile, after initially denying allegations that U.S. forces had used chemical agents in Iraq, the Pentagon now says that it did in fact use white phosphorus as a weapon in Fallujah last year. However, it denies having used it against civilians.

The U.S. initially said white phosphorus was used only to illuminate enemy positions, but now admits it was used as a weapon. The sub-

stance can cause burning of the flesh, but is not illegal and is not specifically classified as a chemical weapon.

However, according to the U.S. government Agency for Toxic Substances Disease Registry, "Exposure to white phosphorus may cause burns and irritation, liver, kidney, heart, lung, or bone damage, and death."

Marie Okabe, deputy spokesperson for U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, said recently, "We are aware

of the reported use of white phosphorus in Fallujah last year, and are concerned about its effects on the local civilian population."

"We welcome the decision of the government of Iraq to launch an immediate investigation into this matter," she added. The 1980 Convention on Conventional Weapons bans the use of incendiary weapons against civilians, but the U.S. is one of several nations that are not signatories to the treaty.

"In Vietnam, they poisoned us with Agent Orange, and now they are poisoning another generation with depleted uranium and other toxins," said Dave Curry of the U.S.-based Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

"Out of the 360,000 discharged veterans from the current Iraq war, nearly one in four had already visited VA (the Veterans Administration) for physical injuries or mental health counseling by February 2005," Curry said.

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