U.S. Starts Landmark Agent Orange Cleanup in Vietnam

MIKE IVES,Associated Press

DANANG, Vietnam (AP) — Vo Duoc fights back tears while sharing the news that broke his heart: A few days ago he received test results confirming he and 11 family members have elevated levels of dioxin lingering in their blood.

The family lives in a two-story house near a former U.S. military base in Danang where the defoliant Agent Orange was stored during the Vietnam War, which ended nearly four decades ago. Duoc, 58, sells steel for a living and has diabetes, while his wife battles breast cancer and their daughter has remained childless after suffering repeated miscarriages. For years, Duoc thought the ailments were unrelated, but after seeing the blood tests he now suspects his family unwittingly ingested dioxin from Agent Orange-contaminated fish, vegetables and well water.

Dioxin, a persistent chemical linked to cancer, birth defects and other disabilities, has seeped into Vietnam's soils and watersheds, creating a lasting war legacy that remains a thorny issue between the former foes. Washington has been slow to respond, but on Thursday the U.S. for the first time will begin cleaning up dioxin from Agent Orange that was stored at the former military base, now part of Danang's airport.

"It's better late than never that the U.S. government is cleaning up the environment for our children," Duoc said in Danang, surrounded by family members sitting on plastic stools. "They have to do as much as possible and as quickly as possible."

The $43 million project begins as Vietnam and the U.S. forge closer ties to boost trade and counter China's rising influence in the disputed South China Sea.

Although the countries' economic and military ties are blossoming, progress on addressing the dioxin legacy has been slow. Washington still disputes a claim by Hanoi that between 3 million to 4 million Vietnamese were affected by toxic chemicals sprayed by U.S. planes during the war to eliminate jungle cover for guerrilla fighters, arguing that the actual number is far lower and other environmental factors are to blame for the health issues.

That position irks Vietnamese, who say the United States maintains a double standard in acknowledging the consequences of Agent Orange.

The U.S. has given billions of dollars in disability payments to American servicemen who developed illnesses associated with dioxin after exposure to the defoliant during the Vietnam War.

In 2004, a group of Vietnamese citizens filed suit in a U.S. court against companies that produced the chemical, but the case was dismissed and the Supreme Court declined to take it up.

Until a few years ago, Washington took a defensive position whenever Agent Orange was raised because no one had determined how much dioxin remained in Vietnam's soil and watersheds, and the U.S. worried about potential liabilities, said Susan Hammond, director of the War Legacies Project, a U.S. nonprofit organization that mainly focuses on the Agent Orange legacy from the Vietnam War.

"There was a lot of the blame game going on, and it led nowhere," Hammond said by telephone from Vermont. "But now at least progress is being made."

Over the past five years, Congress has appropriated about $49 million for environmental remediation and about $11 million to help people living with disabilities in Vietnam regardless of cause. Experts have identified three former U.S. air bases — in Danang in central Vietnam and the southern locations of Bien Hoa and Phu Cat — as hotspots where Agent Orange was mixed, stored and loaded onto planes.

The U.S. military dumped some 20 million gallons (75 million liters) of Agent Orange and other herbicides on about a quarter of former South Vietnam between 1962 and 1971.

The defoliant decimated about 5 million acres (2 million hectares) of forest — roughly the size of Massachusetts — and another 500,000 acres (202,000 hectares) of crops.

The war ended on April 30, 1975, when northern Communist forces seized control of Saigon, the U.S.-backed former capital of South Vietnam. The country was then reunified under a one-party Communist government. Following years of poverty and isolation, Vietnam shook hands with the U.S. in 1995 and normalized diplomatic relations.

Since then, the relationship has flourished and the two countries have become important trading partners. Military ties have also strengthened, with Vietnam looking to the U.S. amid rising tensions with China in the disputed South China Sea, which is believed to be rich in oil and gas reserves and is crossed by vital shipping lanes.

Although Washington remains a vocal critic of Vietnam's human rights record, it also views the country as a key ally in its push to re-engage militarily in the Asia-Pacific region. The U.S. says maintaining peace and freedom of navigation in the sea is in its national interest.

The Agent Orange issue has continued to blight the U.S.-Vietnam relationship because dioxin can linger in soils and at the bottom of lakes and rivers for generations, entering the food supply through the fat of fish and other animals.

Vietnam's Ministry of Defense and the U.S. now plan to excavate 73,000 cubic meters (2.5 million cubic feet) of soil from the airport and heat it to a high temperature in storage tanks until the dioxin is removed. The project is expected to be completed in four years.

Walter Isaacson, CEO of the Washington-based Aspen Institute, said Thursday's start "marks the coming together of our two countries to achieve a practical solution to dioxin contamination."

His organization coordinates the U.S-Vietnam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange/Dioxin, which connects prominent American and Vietnamese scientists, health experts and former officials.

The group in May said that $450 million is needed to clean up dioxin hot spots, provide services to people with disabilities, and repair damaged landscapes across Vietnam over the next five years.

The U.S. is rolling out a $9 million project to address disabilities in Vietnam through 2015, but it continues to dispute Vietnam's claim that dioxin has caused health problems there. It remains unclear whether the U.S. will clean up all of Vietnam's dioxin, and how much it will allocate in the long term for people who claim to be Agent Orange victims.

A national action plan that Vietnam's government released in June lays out goals for dealing with Agent Orange, but does not give a price tag.

Every penny counts for Nguyen Thi Hien, who directs three rehabilitation and vocational training centers for 150 children and young adults with disabilities in Danang on a budget of roughly 100 million dong ($5,000) per month.

The children, busy drawing and making plastic flowers that are sold to raise funds, suffer from a range of physical and mental ailments that Hien says are linked to dioxin.

Vo Duoc, the steel salesman, will travel to the capital, Hanoi, next month to receive treatment for his diabetes. But he says he's more concerned about what will happen to his six grandchildren, who haven't yet been tested for dioxin.

"They had nothing to do with the war," Duoc said. "But I live in fear that they'll test

positive like me."

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