

# ASIAN SCIENTIST

News and information from the asian scientific community

## A School Where Agent Orange Isn't Friendly

In a special Vietnamese school near Hanoi, over 100 children and 40 war veterans – all Agent Orange survivors – are undergoing vocational training.

[Prime Sarmiento](#) | January 7, 2013 | [Features](#)



*AsianScientist (Jan. 7, 2013)* - In a special school located about 11 kilometers south from the Hanoi city center, over 100 students are undergoing vocational training. Apart from learning how to read, write, and count, the students are also taught to embroider, sew blouses, and make decorative plastic flowers. These students need to learn vocational skills which will hopefully help them to set up a small business as they're not likely to get traditional employment after "graduating" from this school.

This is because these students are all residents of Vietnam Friendship Village in Van Canh Commune in Ha Ta province – home to over 100 children and 40 war veterans suffering from mental and physical ailments caused by exposure to Agent Orange. This dioxin is one of the world's most toxic poisons, linked to cancers, diabetes, birth defects, and other disabilities, and is considered a bitter and lasting legacy of the Vietnam War.



*Students at the Friendship Village. Most are unable to speak, they can only garble and grunt (Photo: Prime Sarmiento/Asian Scientist Magazine).*

"The Agent Orange victims are among the poorest of the poor in Vietnam," said Dang Vu Dung, director of the Friendship Village. He said that aside from the fact that victims can't find jobs to support themselves, their parents - who are most probably also Agent Orange victims themselves - spend a lot of money for years of therapy and medication which can last for a lifetime.

Dang said that by providing basic education, medical therapy, and livelihood training, the village will be able to help "children integrate in the society and help them support themselves."

According to Oanh, one of the teachers in Friendship Village, the children stay there for three to four years, and often see their families just once a year as most of them live in remote provinces and are too poor to travel to Hanoi.

A daily class schedule involves children learning how to draw shapes, count numbers, color their drawings, sing, and study about their country's history. Oanh said that they also need to be taught how to take care of themselves like washing their hands, brushing their teeth, and taking a bath. Later, these students will tend the garden and learn how to sew, make paper flowers and silk wallets, and embroider pictures. These products will be sold to supplement the donations solicited for the upkeep of the village.



*Here, students learn simple skills such as how to draw shapes and count (Photo: Prime Sarmiento/Asian Scientist Magazine).*

Oanh, who has a degree in special education and who has been teaching in this school for fifteen years, said it takes a lot of patience to teach the children. The children often don't listen and sometimes run away from the classroom.

"But after some time, they get used to this environment and stay in the classroom," she said.

The children staying in Friendship Village are in fact luckier than the thousands of Agent Orange victims who either died or were rendered completely immobile because of missing limbs and have no hope of supporting themselves.

The plight of Agent Orange victims highlight the fact that, more than financing the clean-up of known toxic hotspots, much more still needs to be done to compensate and give justice to the millions of Vietnamese victims who are still suffering – directly and indirectly – from a war that ended nearly four decades ago.

In his U.S. Congressional Research Service Report issued on August 2012, Michael F. Martin, specialist in Asian Affairs, noted "one major legacy of the Vietnam War that remains unresolved is the damage that Agent Orange, and its accompanying dioxin, have done to the people and the environment of Vietnam."

From 1962 to 1971, the U.S. military sprayed about 20 million gallons of dioxin-contaminated herbicides to defoliate Vietnam's jungles during the war. The offensive, known as Operation Ranch Hand, aimed to use herbicides to destroy the forest and deprive U.S. enemies of food and hideout.

But the herbicide did not only succeed in decimating about three million hectares of forest area in southern Vietnam. It also exposed around 4.8 million Vietnamese to a dangerous chemical. This figure does not only include the so-called first generation of victims - soldiers and villagers who lived in the sprayed areas at the height of the war - but also their children and grandchildren.

The U.S. Institute of Medicine has cited evidence of an association between exposure to Agent Orange and illnesses including soft-tissue sarcoma, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, chronic lymphocytic leukemia, Hodgkin's disease, prostate cancer, Parkinson's disease, heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, and spina bifida.

Agent Orange continues to threaten Vietnam as it is a persistent organic pollutant that does not degrade easily. The chemical has seeped through soils and watersheds and has poisoned the human food chain, says the Canada-based Hatfield Consultants, which has identified the airbase surrounding Bien Hoa, Da Nang, and Phu Cat as hotspots with high dioxin concentrations that continue to pose health problems to villagers living in these areas.

In the Da Nang airbase, soil concentrations have toxic equivalents (TEQ) of up to 365 parts per billion – significantly higher than the international maximum level of 1.0 p.p.b. In the Bien Hoa airbase, one soil sample has a TEQ concentration at over 1,000 p.p.b.

For years, the U.S. government has denied responsibility over the chemical warfare. But in August last year, the U.S. government announced it will allocate US\$43 million to clean up its former military base in Danang. Prior to that, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who visited Vietnam in July, said in her speech that this is "a legacy issue that we remain concerned about and we have increased our financial commitment to dealing with it."

According to Dao Xuan Lai, head of the Sustainable Development Cluster of United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in Vietnam, the UNDP and the Global Environment Facility managed to remove Phu Cat from the hotspot list by putting the contaminated soil in a landfill. This method did not destroy the dioxins, he said, but reined in the dioxin's spread and protected the environment and health of the residents.

Dao said that there are already existing technologies like thermal desorption (insulating the soil at a very high temperature) that can destroy dioxins. But not only is this technology expensive – costing at least US\$70 million, it also needs to be tested on a wider scale.

"There's nowhere in the world where such high concentration of dioxin can be found," he said.

The Vietnam government has already built a landfill in Bien Hoa to control dioxin spread, sealing 100,000 cubic meters of polluted soil in the ground at a total cost of US\$5 million.

Dao said another low-cost technology called bioremediation, the use of microorganisms such as bacteria and fungi to remove pollutants, is being tested to see if it will be effective in cutting the high levels of toxicity in hotspots.

But more than the cleanup, the victims are hoping that they will receive a much needed compensation. Most of them just depend on the monthly government subsidy of US\$19 – not enough to cover medical bills.

"Our government doesn't have enough money to support all victims," said Mai Duc Chinh, spokesman for the Vietnamese Association for Victims of Agent Orange (VAVA), a humanitarian organization formed in 2003 by a group of Vietnamese doctors, veterans, and other advocates for Agent Orange victims.

The Vietnamese government, local organizations like VAVA, and several international organizations have extended assistance to victims, and since 2004, have donated US\$7.5 million in cash and product donations to help them. The collected funds were used to build houses and community centers; and to give scholarships and medical aid to victims.

One project that has benefited from generous donors is Friendship Village. The village was established by an American war veteran in 1988 and receives international aid managed by a committee with representatives from the U.S., Canada, France, Germany, Japan, and Vietnam. Similar centers can also be found in other provinces of Vietnam.

Still, this is not enough. The Friendship Village spends roughly US\$290,000 a year on school maintenance, salaries, and treatment of the war veterans. But Director Dang Vu Dung said the village needs 20 percent more for its budget, owing to inflation and the growing cost of maintaining the village.



*Oanh and her students hard at work (Photo: Prime Sarmiento/Asian Scientist Magazine).*

He added that teaching the students in the village to support themselves is not enough. Dang cited several former village residents who managed to overcome their disabilities and succeeded. One student for instance graduated and went on to attend journalism school. Another is a pair of students who met at the village in 2004, got married and, using the skills learned while in the village, set up a business making decorative flowers.

But such success stories are few and far between. Dang said they need to monitor them and provide some help - like giving them seed capital for a small business for instance - after they leave the village.

"But we don't have enough resources. In the future, we want more resources because no one is helping the children after they left the village," he said.

"They (AO victims) live a hard life," agrees Mai Duc Chinh, VAVA spokesman.

VAVA's main task, Mai said, is to raise funds and request for support from individuals and international organizations in Vietnam and overseas.

But more than that, VAVA is working to give justice to the victims who continue to suffer.

To this end, VAVA is asking the U.S. government to take responsibility for their actions, noting that apart from funding for the cleanup, they also need to help the victims who continue to suffer.

The organization is also busy seeking justice for the victims and has even filed lawsuits against the two Agent Orange manufacturers - Dow Chemical Company and Monsanto Company - which supplied the toxic chemicals to the U.S. military. VAVA lost the case, but it is not giving up, it says.

It is now preparing a class-action lawsuit against the U.S. manufacturers of Agent Orange to be filed before an international tribunal.



"We will continue to remind everybody that chemical warfare should not happen again," Mai said.

-----

Copyright: Asian Scientist Magazine.

Disclaimer: This article does not necessarily reflect the views of AsianScientist or its staff.

Tags: [Agent Orange](#), [Pollution](#), [Vietnam](#), [Vietnam Friendship Village](#), [Vietnamese Association for Victims of Agent Orange](#)

## RELATED STORIES FROM ASIAN SCIENTIST



### Vietnam Vets Twice As Likely To Have Leukemia, Study

Vietnam war veterans have double the rate of chronic lymphatic leukemia compared to the general population, says a new study.



### Massive Groundwater Pumping In Asia May Poison Millions, Study

Millions of people in Asia may be at risk of arsenic poisoning because of massive groundwater pumping, scientists warned in a new study.



### How Can Asia Protect Its Water Resources?

The economic rise of countries in Asia has created serious pressure on their water supplies, writes Justine Doody.



### South Korea, USA To Probe Agent Orange Dumping

US and South Korea have agreed to jointly investigate the alleged burial of hundred barrels of Agent Orange at US military base in South Korea, according to a new report in The Korea Herald.



### Rice Consumption In Bangladesh Linked To High Arsenic Exposure & Toxicity

A study of more than 18,000 people in Bangladesh has established a link between rice consumption and arsenic exposure and toxicity.



### In Search Of A Good Dam On The Mekong

Plans to harness hydropower potential in the Lower Mekong Basin for the first time has led to a search for a good dam.

**ASIANSCIENTIST**  
News and information from the asian scientific community

Copyright © 2011-2017  
Asian Scientist Magazine | Science, Technology and Medicine News Updates From Asia  
All Rights Reserved.