# Vietnam continues to grapple with the legacy of Agent Orange decades after the war



Decades after the conclusion of the Vietnam War, the lingering effects of the conflict continue to impact millions of Vietnamese people, with a significant focus on the devastating legacy of Agent Orange. This potent herbicide, extensively used by US forces during the war, has left a toxic residue that continues to affect subsequent generations.

Nguyen Thanh Hai, a 34-year-old resident of Da Nang, personifies the enduring consequences of this chemical exposure. Living with severe developmental disabilities believed to be connected to Agent Orange, Hai faces daily challenges in performing basic tasks such as buttoning his shirt or writing. He attends a special school dedicated to children affected by the chemical, located in Da Nang, a city that once hosted a major US airbase used to store large quantities of Agent Orange.

During the Vietnam War, US military operations involved the spraying of approximately 72 million litres of defoliants over Vietnamese territory, with Agent Orange accounting for more than half of this volume. The herbicide contained dioxin, an extremely toxic substance linked to cancer, birth defects, and extensive environmental degradation. It is estimated that approximately three million Vietnamese individuals, many of them children, continue to suffer from health conditions associated with exposure to Agent Orange.

Despite significant efforts by the Vietnamese government, supported in part by delayed financial assistance from the United States, tackling the widespread contamination remains ongoing. The Dealing with this legacy involves the painstaking removal of dioxin-contaminated soil and the restoration of affected areas. However, recent proposed cuts to US foreign aid under the administration of former President Donald Trump have raised concerns over the future of these vital cleanup initiatives.

After the war ended, Vietnam was left with numerous dioxin "hotspots" distributed across 58 of its 63 provinces. The chemical contamination has caused generational health issues, impacting not only those directly exposed but also their descendants, with ailments including cancers and birth defects that affect the nervous system and skeletal structure. The scientific community has yet to definitively establish causality between Agent Orange exposure and all associated health outcomes, partly because early post-war collaboration between Vietnam and the US focused more on environmental cleanup than on comprehensive epidemiological studies.

Nguyen Thanh Hai’s personal story highlights the human dimension of this legacy. He aspires to become a soldier like his grandfather and began attending a specialised school only five years ago after years of isolation at home. “I am happy here because I have many friends,” he shared, showing hope within his challenging circumstances.

Environmentally, the use of Agent Orange devastated Vietnam’s ecosystems, destroying nearly half of its mangrove forests that serve as natural coastal barriers and damaging vast areas of tropical forest. The chemical poisoning also depleted soil nutrients in many climate-sensitive regions, compounding ecological vulnerability.

Efforts to remediate contaminated sites have been extensive but remain incomplete. In Da Nang, a major US-funded cleanup costing approximately $110 million was completed in 2018, but a heavily polluted zone equivalent to around ten football fields remains. Similar work is ongoing at Bien Hoa airbase, where a decade-long project initiated in 2020 to remove roughly 500,000 cubic meters of dioxin-polluted soil experienced a brief halt but has since resumed.

The cooperation between the United States and Vietnam in addressing the war’s environmental and health consequences has been instrumental in improving bilateral relations. This collaboration culminated in 2023 with Vietnam elevating the US to the status of its comprehensive strategic partner, reinforcing their joint interests in the Indo-Pacific region. Former US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen noted during a visit to Vietnam that “The United States considers Vietnam a key partner in advancing a free and open Indo-Pacific.”

Nevertheless, the recent US government moves to scale back foreign aid present significant challenges. During the Trump administration, cuts to USAID funding caused delays in key projects, prompting worries about the US's future commitment. Nguyen Van An, chairman of the Association for Victims of Agent Orange in Danang, emphasised the importance of ongoing support, stating, “We always believe that the US government and the manufacturers of this toxic chemical must have the responsibility to support the victims.”

Charles Bailey, co-author of *From Enemies to Partners: Vietnam, the U.S. and Agent Orange*, highlighted the precarious situation, noting that "only 30% of [contaminated soil] has been dealt with and that is less contaminated," and warned that the lack of ongoing efforts could lead to further environmental and public health risks if contaminated soil re-enters water systems.

The cessation of USAID activity threatens the administration of critical funding, as the majority of aid staff in Vietnam are expected to depart by the end of the year. Without dedicated personnel, the continuation of important remediation and support programmes will be in jeopardy.

Tim Rieser, a former foreign policy adviser associated with US congressional support for these projects, expressed concern that, despite congressional backing, the programmes could falter without proper staffing, saying, “For more than 30 years, the US and Vietnam have worked together to rebuild relations by dealing with the worst legacies of the war, like Agent Orange. Now the Trump administration is mindlessly shutting everything down, with no concern for the impact of their actions on relations with an important partner in the Indo-Pacific.”

The US Embassy in Hanoi has not issued a statement regarding these developments. Meanwhile, American Vietnam War veteran Chuck Searcy, involved in humanitarian efforts in Vietnam since 1995, voiced apprehension that the progress made could quickly unravel, observing, “They’ve been victimised twice, once by the war and the consequences that they’ve suffered. And now by having the rug pulled out from under them.”

As Vietnam navigates the ongoing challenges posed by this war-era chemical contamination, the completion of extensive cleanup work and continuous support to affected populations remain critical issues interwoven with both health and diplomatic concerns.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/symptoms/24689-agent-orange-effects> - This source provides information on the health effects of Agent Orange, including cancer and birth defects, and notes the significant number of people affected. It supports the claims about the herbicide's toxic impact on both veterans and Vietnamese citizens.
* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Impact_of_Agent_Orange_in_Vietnam> - Wikipedia details the ecological and health impacts of Agent Orange in Vietnam, including the creation of refugees and long-term environmental degradation. It corroborates the description of the herbicide's devastations on Vietnam's ecosystems.
* <https://www.warrelatedillness.va.gov/education/exposures/agent-orange.asp> - This page from the War Related Illness and Injury Study Center explains that Agent Orange contained dioxin, a toxic substance, and addresses its health implications for veterans. It supports information on the presence of dioxin in Agent Orange.
* <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK209605/> - The NCBI page explains the presumption of exposure for veterans serving in Vietnam and lists diseases associated with Agent Orange exposure, underlining its health consequences.
* <https://news.va.gov/17744/10-things-every-veteran-know-agent-orange/> - VA News provides information on Agent Orange as a tactical herbicide used during the Vietnam War to remove foliage, supporting the article's context on its use and effects.
* <https://www.noahwire.com> - Although not directly providing separate corroborating evidence beyond the article content, Noah Wire Services is the original source of the article discussing the ongoing impacts of Agent Orange in Vietnam.
* <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/southeast-asia/agent-orange-vietnam-war-effects-b2740915.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data