# Agent Orange legacy still haunts Vietnam decades after war



Decades after the Vietnam War’s conclusion, the long-lasting repercussions of chemical warfare continue to affect millions across Vietnam. A recent detailed report from The Independent highlights the ongoing struggles related to the herbicide Agent Orange, used extensively by US forces during the conflict, and the significant challenges faced in addressing its legacy.

Agent Orange, a potent defoliant contaminated with dioxin, was sprayed across Vietnam during the war in an effort to eliminate forest cover used by enemy forces. Over 72 million litres of various defoliants were deployed, with more than half being Agent Orange. This chemical contamination has left widespread environmental damage and persistent health consequences. An estimated three million Vietnamese, including many children, suffer with disabilities and illnesses linked to this exposure.

Nguyen Thanh Hai, a 34-year-old resident of Da Nang, embodies the human cost of the war’s chemical legacy. Hai lives with severe developmental disabilities attributed to Agent Orange exposure. He attends a specialised school for children affected by these toxic chemicals in Da Nang, a city that formerly hosted a US airbase where large quantities of Agent Orange were stored. While environmental cleanup efforts have been undertaken, significant contamination remains in local soil and water supplies.

Throughout the conflict, the devastation extended beyond human health to ravage Vietnam’s natural defences. Nearly half the nation’s mangrove forests were destroyed, weakening protections against storms. Tropical forests were permanently damaged, and critical soil nutrients were depleted, compounding climate vulnerability in some regions.

Since the war’s end, Vietnam has fenced off and cordoned heavily polluted sites such as Da Nang airport and has provided support to affected families. Cooperation between the US and Vietnam only began in earnest after 2006, focusing primarily on environmental remediation rather than definitive scientific studies of health impacts. Charles Bailey, co-author of *From Enemies to Partners: Vietnam, the U.S. and Agent Orange*, noted to The Independent that “the science of causality is still incomplete.” Agents Orange-related health impacts span multiple generations, affecting children and even grandchildren of those originally exposed.

The US government’s recognition of Agent Orange’s harmful effects has evolved over decades. In 1991, it acknowledged links to certain diseases in veterans, granting benefits accordingly. Since then, more than $155 million has been spent on aid to individuals with disabilities in affected Vietnamese areas and on clearance of unexploded ordnance. Cleanup of contaminated sites is a costly and complex endeavour, requiring contaminated soil to be excavated and treated at high temperatures or securely buried. In Da Nang, a $110 million US-funded cleanup was completed in 2018, but contaminated land roughly the size of ten football pitches remains.

Vietnam’s relationship with the US has grown stronger through joint efforts to address war legacies, culminating in the US attaining ‘comprehensive strategic partner’ status with Vietnam in 2023. Former US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen described Vietnam as “a key partner in advancing a free and open Indo-Pacific” during her visit that year.

However, concerns have mounted in recent times over the impact of political shifts in Washington. Cuts to foreign aid under the Trump administration caused interruptions in key projects, stirring anxiety about the future of the US commitment to remediation efforts. Nguyen Van An, chairman of the Association for Victims of Agent Orange in Da Nang, expressed to The Independent: “We always believe that the US government and the manufacturers of this toxic chemical must have the responsibility to support the victims.” He added his hope that any interruptions to aid due to changing US politics would be temporary.

One major ongoing operation is a 10-year project launched in 2020 to clear approximately 500,000 cubic metres of dioxin-contaminated soil at Bien Hoa airbase, equivalent to 40,000 truckloads. This project briefly halted in March but has since resumed. Still, experts like Bailey highlight that only a portion of contaminated soil has been treated, and the remainder requires further efforts, including construction of an incinerator yet to be completed.

There is also uncertainty surrounding future funding and administration of US-supported programmes. Bailey warned that “most staffers in Vietnam are expected to be gone by later this year,” which risks a breakdown in project oversight even if financial support continues.

Tim Rieser, senior advisor to Senator Peter Welch and former foreign policy aide to Senator Patrick Leahy — who secured initial funding for these remediation efforts — affirmed Congressional support for the programmes but acknowledged that without dedicated personnel, continued progress would be difficult. He criticised the Trump administration’s reductions as “mindlessly shutting everything down.”

American Vietnam War veteran Chuck Searcy, who has been active in humanitarian work in Vietnam since 1995, expressed concern about the fragility of trust built over decades: “They’ve been victimized twice, once by the war and the consequences that they’ve suffered. And now by having the rug pulled out from under them.”

The US embassy in Hanoi declined to respond to requests for comment on the status of these efforts.

This ongoing situation underscores the complex and enduring nature of the Vietnam War's chemical legacy, a challenge that spans generations and involves intricate international cooperation, scientific investigation, and humanitarian aid.

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

## Bibliography

1. <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/symptoms/24689-agent-orange-effects> - This resource provides detailed information about the health effects of Agent Orange, including cancer, congenital disorders, and life-threatening complications, corroborating the health impacts described in the article.
2. <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/> - The VA's public health page on Agent Orange supports the information about exposure risks and health consequences for military personnel and civilians alike, which aligns with the article's discussion on widespread exposure.
3. <https://www.science.org/content/article/vietnam-health-effects-agent-orange-remain-uncertain-50-years-later> - This article highlights the ongoing uncertainty regarding the health effects of Agent Orange in Vietnam, mirroring the report's mention of incomplete scientific understanding of causality.
4. <https://www.va.gov/disability/eligibility/hazardous-materials-exposure/agent-orange/> - The VA's eligibility criteria for Agent Orange exposure-related disabilities underscore the acknowledged harmful effects, consistent with the article's mention of US recognition of these health impacts.
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6. <https://www.noahwire.com> - While the specific article link is not directly available, Noah Wire Services is credited as the source for information on ongoing challenges and cooperative efforts between the US and Vietnam to address Agent Orange's legacy.
7. <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/southeast-asia/agent-orange-vietnam-war-effects-b2740915.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data