

The Future of Agent Orange

Remarks by Charles R. Bailey
on the
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[In Vietnamese and again in English: Good morning ladies and gentlemen! In 2005 I was living in Hanoi and came to Ho Chi Minh City to spend a month improving my Vietnamese. Co Giao Binh was my teacher. Thank you Co Giao for coming today. You're not responsible! (laughter)]

Ambassador Ton Nu Thi Ninh, thank you for your kind opening remarks. We also appreciate DPO Tim Liston coming today. And I particularly appreciate that the former American ambassador, Ted Osius, is here with us this morning. Ted did just simply a lot during his ambassadorship to move this whole issue forward. As ambassador he regularly said that we need to openly acknowledge our past if we are to build a better future between the U.S. and Vietnam. Thank you Ted! And I want to give a call out to Chris Abrams, the officer at USAID directly in charge of their Agent Orange work. Chris, you're terrific!

We also want to thank Dr. Vo Thi Hoang Yen, the director of DRD for her leadership on disability in Vietnam. As many of you know, Dr. Yen received the 2018 Ramon Magsaysay Award for her work. Congratulations! (applause)

Ladies and gentlemen,

In the spring of 1998, shortly after I had come to live in Vietnam as the representative of the Ford Foundation, I went to the Central Highlands. When I got there I saw hillsides which once had been covered with deep, ecologically rich forests, but now held just pockets of scrub vegetation. I was stunned. But I was even more stunned when I returned to Hanoi. No one was willing to talk about Agent Orange. The State Department had in fact instructed its diplomats to never utter the words "Agent Orange."

How far we have come today, where people of both countries are steadily working together to bring this legacy of that now long ago war to a proper end. Two new ideas helped create the conditions for a breakthrough.

--First, let's focus on the dioxin hotspots. Dioxin is at levels dangerous to human health, it turns out, at just three former American airbases, and two of them have been cleaned up -- Phu Cat and Da Nang. And now Bien Hoa awaits.

--The second concept, let's focus on the severely disabled. Research we report in the book indicates that Agent Orange victims tend to be people with severe deformation of their arms and legs, cognitive disability and developmental delay.

Initially the two governments focused on Da Nang, and beginning in 2008 USAID provided assistance there for projects serving people with disabilities and dioxin clean up at the airport. Now, the spotlight has shifted to seven provinces that were heavily sprayed and which have high incidences of people living with severe and very severe disabilities. These provinces are Tay Ninh, Binh Phuoc, and Dong Nai and further north, Binh Dinh, Quang Nam and Thua-Tien Hue, with more to come.

USAID considers Tay Ninh as a model for services to the severely disabled. On Monday and Tuesday Dr. Son and I visited examples of this work in Tay Ninh and had dinner with Nguyen Thanh Ngoc, the vice chair of the Tay Ninh Peoples Committee.

Since 2007 the Congress has appropriated \$230 million for Agent Orange in Vietnam. But we need to continue to press upon them the need to continue. Vietnamese Americans can be particularly effective in telling Congress “Don’t stop now!”

Ladies and gentlemen. The end of the disaster of Agent Orange is within the reach of people of goodwill on both sides—those in government, the two militaries and those in civilian life. Given the positive record of collaboration and partnership since 2007, it would be foolish, and indeed disgraceful, not to carry through to the completion of the task. Both Vietnam and the United States want to move forward on this together.

Dr. Le Ke Son and I believe our book will be useful in ensuring that progress today continues to be progress tomorrow.

Thank you.