"65 Years of Agent Orange Disaster"
Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations Seminar
Hanoi, Vietnam
October 21, 2026

**REMARKS**
**Dr. Charles R. Bailey (via Zoom)**

Leaders of the Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations and the Vietnam-USA Society. Leaders of the Ministry of National Defense, National Action Center for Toxic Chemicals and Environmental Remediation (NACCET) and the Vietnam Association of Victims of Agent Orange (VAVA). Ms. Vuong Thi Quyen of Quang Tri province. Ladies and Gentlemen.

Thank you for this opportunity.

I want to especially thank Chi Quyen for her profound stories of what it's like to grow up a victim of Agent Orange. One statement of hers especially stood out. Here it is: " No war has the right to strip future generations of their destiny." Chi Quen is absolutely right. I totally agree.

Ladies and gentlemen.

I've been asked to talk about how international NGOs engage with Agent Orange. Twenty years ago the Ford Foundation helped break the deadlock on Agent Orange. Ford then funded the first phase of dioxin clean up, piloted assistance for Agent Orange victims, and helped create the U.S.-Vietnam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange/ Dioxin. Other international NGOs, UNICEF, UNDP, businesses, and other actors have also spoken up, pitched in, and helped-- even with very meager resources. In 2018 the Stimson Center in Washington, DC formed the War Legacies Working Group. The Working Group, currently under the leadership of Andrew Wells-Dang has about 40 members. They represent NGOs who advocate on Agent Orange and UXO in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia and find the funds for projects which help war victims. For well over two decades now, international NGOs have pushed for progress on Agent Orange. That's what I want to do again here today—Push for progress with the resources we have because I fear time is running out.

Let's quickly look at the big picture of war legacies, in which initially U.S. veterans, and then both governments and international and Vietnamese NGOs have each played their part. We have the joint search for American MIAs; UXO awareness and clearance and help for UXO victims; dioxin clean up at Da Nang and Bien Hoa; help for severely disabled people in the heavily sprayed areas. And most recently, the Vietnam Wartime Accounting Initiative with the US providing archival and technical assistance to the identification of Vietnamese MIAs.

The Vietnamese have led in all these areas through the Ministry of National Defense, Committee 701, NACET and earlier the 10-80 Committee, Committee 33, the ministries of Health, Environment & Natural Resources and MOLISA. For many years now the U.S. Congress has appropriated funds which have been used for UXO and Agent Orange programs by the State

Department and the Department of Defense and for a long time, USAID. I want to particularly honor and appreciate Senator Patrick Leahy and Tim Rieser, his foreign affairs advisor. Without Senator Leahy the U.S. program would not exist.

Thus, much progress, but there is still more to do. We have not yet fully addressed the issue of Agent Orange victims. According to a 2024 evaluation study, U.S. health and disability assistance since 2021 reached fewer than 20% of the people deemed by the Vietnamese to be victims of Agent Orange. That is to say, over the four years 2021 to 2024 more than 80 percent of the direct assistance beneficiaries were not recognized Agent Orange victims.

Reaching and helping many more of the Agent Orange victims is important, and possible.

Recognizing the victims and their ongoing struggle for justice is also important, and possible.

The two are linked.

I'll explain each of these two points, beginning with the question of justice. How could justice be done? Recognizing the victims and their ongoing struggle for justice is the first important step. The U.S. should do so because our partner, the Vietnamese government does it.

The U.S. does not have to admit legal responsibility but it could discard the "regardless of cause" narrative. It could move beyond it. It could say this, for example: "The United States provides funds to help people with disabilities in Vietnam, including those whom Vietnam sees as Agent Orange victims."

This simple statement recognizes the victims. It will also end criticism of the US double standard in recognizing American veterans who are affected by Agent Orange but not affected Vietnamese.

What kind of closer partnership could these U.S. words bring? The U.S. has just made $71 million available for new projects on Agent Orange-related health and disability assistance. Here are three steps a closer partnership can take to reach more of the victims.

First, provide resources to the Vietnam Association of Victims of Agent Orange (VAVA) and the National Action Center for Toxic Chemicals and Environmental Remediation (NACET) to **update lists of households with disabled war victims** who meet criteria set by the Vietnamese for victims of Agent Orange and unexploded ordnance.

Next, on this list select households below the poverty line having a severely disabled family member **who requires the full time attention of a family caregiver** in the heavily sprayed provinces. Half of the $71 million in new money should go to this group; the other half goes to building stronger social support services.

Third, make direct household assistance last for **three years—three years of 'wrap around' services tailored to each family's specific needs.** These are services which strengthen family capacity and improve the beneficiary's conditions of life. Examples are housing upgrades to

better accommodate disability needs, training and small enterprise loans for able bodied family members, occupational therapy and other social services.

In short, three steps, three years, real impact. Direct assistance is the closest thing to redress for the victims. It also empowers victims and their families to be independent and self-sufficient. This will also complement VAVA's and the Vietnamese government's efforts to support victims.

Addressing Agent Orange is now an area of defense cooperation and part of the comprehensive strategic partnership. There is growing momentum to deepen war legacy cooperation, as seen in the new Memorandum of Understanding and active collaboration in the identification of Vietnamese MIAs.

Ladies and Gentlemen. Now is the time. Right now, just now, is the best opportunity we've ever had for Vietnam and the U.S. to deepen their partnership on Agent Orange through **greater recognition**--more specific language like what I've proposed here-- and **better targeting**.

I will leave you with one final thought. In the U.S. Congress the appropriation for Agent Orange in Vietnam has to be fought for afresh each and every year. Senator Patrick Leahy, who championed these appropriations for 15 years, retired in 2022. It is dangerous to assume that the U.S. appropriation for Agent Orange disability assistance will go on forever. It will not. Eventually it will end. So let's make the best use we possibly can of the available U.S. government assistance.

Vietnam needs to focus U.S. disability assistance to reach much larger numbers of Agent Orange victims.

In this Year 65 of Agent Orange Vietnam can push for this kind of progress.

Thank you.

(revised October 25, 2026)