"65 Years of Agent Orange Disaster"
Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations Seminar
Hanoi, Vietnam
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Remarks
Dr. Le Ke Son, former Director-General, Office of Committee 33--National Steering Committee for the Overcoming of the Consequences of Toxic Chemicals used by USA in the war in Vietnam

Ladies and gentlemen,
Dear American friends,

I would like to thank the workshop organizers for giving me this opportunity to speak with you about Agent Orange.

After listening to the presentation by the representative of the Ministry of National Defence's agency responsible for coordinating efforts to address the consequences of Agent Orange, watching the documentary on Agent Orange, and viewing hundreds of photographs exhibited at the workshop, I noticed a regrettable gap.

There were no images of the scientists who pioneered work on Agent Orange, including Professors Tôn Thất Tùng, Hoàng Đình Cầu, Lê Cao Đài, Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Phượng, and Võ Quý, among others.

There was also no information about the establishment and work of the Committee for the Investigation of the Consequences of Chemical Warfare in Vietnam (Committee 10-80), the National Steering Committee for Overcoming the Consequences of Chemical Warfare in Vietnam (Steering Committee 33), or the Dialogue Group on Agent Orange.

I wish the photographs or documentary had included Senator Patrick Leahy, who made an enormous contribution to changing perceptions and policies concerning Agent Orange in Vietnam.

You should know that what we have achieved today would have been unimaginable in the years 2000–2005.

During the negotiations to normalize relations between our two countries, the American side did not discuss the consequences of Agent Orange. The normalization document contained no mention of Agent Orange. I asked former Deputy Prime Minister Vũ Khoan, who bore primary responsibility for those negotiations, why an issue as important as the consequences of Agent Orange had not been mentioned at all. He replied, "Because there were other matters that were even more important."

A meeting in Singapore between U.S. and Vietnamese government officials to discuss Agent Orange was so contentious that no agreed record of the meeting could be produced. A Vietnam–U.S. scientific workshop held in Hanoi in 2003, attended by more than 400 delegates, likewise failed to reach a conclusion on the harmful effects of Agent Orange on human health. At the first meeting of the Vietnam–U.S. Joint Advisory Committee on Agent Orange (JAC), the American side would not accept the term "victims."

I recall these events so that everyone can understand just how difficult those years were.

We came to realize that if we continued debating scientific and legal issues, there would be no end in sight. We had to look at the reality of the contamination and the lives of Agent Orange victims, and take action.

At the request of U.S. Ambassador Michael Marine, I accompanied him on a visit to the dioxin-contaminated area at Da Nang Airport. He was the first American diplomatic official to visit the site. Later, after he had retired, I met him in the United States and asked what had motivated him to make that visit. He replied, "Although some officials at the U.S. Embassy tried to dissuade me, I went ahead. I recognized the ethical considerations involved and the responsibility of the United States in this matter."

It was "ethics and responsibility" that took the place of scientific and legal disputes and changed the course of the Agent Orange issue. Here, we must acknowledge the pioneering role and contributions of the Ford Foundation, particularly the personal contributions of its president, Susan Berresford, and its representative in Vietnam, Dr. Charles Bailey, as well as the work of the Dialogue Group on Agent Orange.

We should not return to the old path of scientific and legal disputes. VTV4 produced a carefully crafted, insightful documentary on Agent Orange, featuring many views expressed by American veterans themselves and their children and grandchildren, entitled "An Endless Journey." But this cannot be an "endless journey." There must be an endpoint.

To reach that endpoint, we must accelerate efforts to address the consequences of Agent Orange. Dioxin remediation in Bien Hoa has been far too slow. Had we used Shimizu's soil-washing technology, which was successfully tested in Bien Hoa, we would already have completed the dioxin cleanup there at a much lower cost.

Projects to support victims remain too few, too small, and fragmented. We need a more ambitious strategy and plans to provide assistance more quickly and effectively.

Let me reiterate: we cannot continue debating scientific and legal issues. We must act on the basis of ethics and responsibility, compassion and humanitarian principles, and practical, effective measures. We cannot allow this to remain an "endless journey."

Thank you.