

U.S. Chemical Warfare: Agent Orange in Vietnam

August 10, 51 Years After the Chemical War Began in Vietnam

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On April 30th 2018, we will be commemorating the 43d anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War. US war crimes prevail. America used chemical weapons against an entire nation. This article was first published by GR in August 2012

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There are images from the U.S. War against Vietnam that have been indelibly imprinted on the minds of Americans who lived through it. One is the naked napalm-burned girl running from her village with flesh hanging off her body. Another is a photo of the piles of bodies from the My Lai massacre, where U.S. troops executed 504 civilians in a small village. Then there is the photograph of the silent scream of a woman student leaning over the body of her dead friend at Kent State University whose only crime was protesting the bombing of Cambodia in 1970. Finally, there is the memory of decorated members of Vietnam Veterans Against the War testifying at the Winter Soldier Hearings, often in tears, to atrocities in which they had participated during the war.

These pictures are heartbreaking. They expose the horrors of war. The U.S. War against Vietnam was televised, while images of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have intentionally been hidden from us. But what was not televised was the relentless ten years (1961-1971) of spraying millions of gallons of toxic herbicides over vast areas of South Vietnam. These chemicals exposed almost 5 million people, mostly civilians, to deadly consequences. The toxic herbicides, most notably Agent Orange, contained dioxin, one of the most dangerous chemicals known to man. It has been recognized by the World Health Organization as a carcinogen (causes cancer) and by the American Academy of Medicine as a teratogen (causes birth defects).

From the beginning of the spraying 51 years ago, until today, millions of Vietnamese have died from, or been completely incapacitated by, diseases which the U. S. government recognizes are related to Agent Orange for purposes of granting compensation to Vietnam Veterans in the United States. The Vietnamese, who were the intended victims of this spraying, experienced the most intense, horrible impact on human health and environmental devastation. Second and third generations of children, born to parents exposed during the war and in areas of heavy spraying — un-remediated “hot spots” of dioxin contamination, — suffer unspeakable deformities that medical authorities attribute to the dioxin in Agent Orange.

The Vietnamese exposed to the chemical suffer from cancer, liver damage, pulmonary and heart diseases, defects to reproductive capacity, and skin and nervous disorders. Their children and grandchildren have severe physical deformities, mental and physical

disabilities, diseases, and shortened life spans. The forests and jungles in large parts of southern Vietnam were devastated and denuded. Centuries-old habitat was destroyed, and will not regenerate with the same diversity for hundreds of years. Animals that inhabited the forests and jungles are threatened with extinction, disrupting the communities that depended on them. The rivers and underground water in some areas have also been contaminated. Erosion and desertification will change the environment, causing dislocation of crop and animal life.

For the past 51 years, the Vietnamese people have been attempting to address this legacy of war by trying to get the United States and the chemical companies to accept responsibility for this ongoing nightmare. An unsuccessful legal action by Vietnamese victims of Agent Orange against the chemical companies in U.S. federal court, begun in 2004, has nonetheless spawned a movement to hold the United States accountable for using such dangerous chemicals on civilian populations. The movement has resulted in pending legislation HR 2634 - The Victims of Agent Orange Relief Act of 2011, which attempts to provide medical, rehabilitative and social service compensation to the Vietnamese victims of Agent Orange, remediation of dioxin-contaminated "hot spots," and medical services for the children and grandchildren of U. S. Vietnam veterans and Vietnamese-Americans who have been born with the same diseases and deformities.

Using weapons of war on civilian populations violates the laws of war, which recognize the principle of distinction between military and civilian objects, requiring armies to avoid civilian targets. These laws of war are enshrined in the Hague Convention and the Nuremberg principles, and are codified in the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the Optional Protocol of 1977, as well as the International Criminal Court statute. The aerial bombardments of civilian population centers in World Wars I and II violated the principle of distinction, as did the detonation of nuclear weapons at Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and August 9 of 1945. Hundreds of thousands of Japanese people were killed in an instant, even though Japan was already negotiating the terms of surrender.

The use of Agent Orange on civilian populations violated the laws of war and yet no one has been held to account. Taxpayers pick up the tab of the Agent Orange Compensation fund for the U. S. Veterans at a cost of 1.52 billion dollars a year. The chemical companies, most specifically Dow and Monsanto, which profited from the manufacture of Agent Orange, paid a pittance to settle the veterans' lawsuit to compensate them, as the unintended victims, for their Agent Orange related illnesses. But the Vietnamese continue to suffer from these violations with almost no recognition, as do the offspring of Agent Orange-exposed U.S. veterans and Vietnamese-Americans.

What is the difference between super powers like the United States violating the laws of war with impunity and the reports of killing of Syrian civilians by both sides in the current civil war? Does the United States have any credibility to demand governments and non-state actors end the killings of civilians, when through wars and drones and its refusal to acknowledge responsibility for the use of Agent Orange, the United States has and is engaging in the very conduct it publicly deplors?

In 1945, at the founding conference of the United Nations, the countries of the world determined:

- to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our

lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and

- to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and
- to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and
- to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.
- If we are to avoid sinking once again into the scourge of war, we must reaffirm the principles of the Charter and establish conditions under which countries take actions that promote rather than undermine justice and respect for our international legal obligations. The alternative is the law of the jungle, where only might makes right. It is time that right makes might.

August 10th marks 51 years since the beginning of the spraying of Agent Orange in Vietnam. In commemoration, the Vietnam Agent Orange Relief and Responsibility Campaign urges you to observe 51 seconds of silence at 12 noon, to think about the horrors of wars which have occurred. We ask you to take action so as not to see future images of naked children running from napalm, or young soldiers wiping out the population of an entire village, or other atrocities associated with war, poverty, and violence around the world. We urge you to take at least 51 seconds for your action. In the United States, you can sign an orange post card to the U.S. Congress asking it to pass HR 2634. This would be a good start to assist the Vietnamese victims of Agent Orange as well as the next generations of those exposed to these dangerous chemicals in both Vietnam and the United States.

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To sign the petition, go to <http://www.vn-agentorange.org/>

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