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# The effects of Agent Orange in Viet Nam and its consequences

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- 1) Historical context, decision.
- 2) Methods, quantities, composition, equivalences.
- 3) Stability, food chain, cell damage.
- 4) Unseen consequences, illnesses.
- 5)"Reparations", scientific proof, Constitution of the United States of America, multinationals, justice.

### **1) HISTORICAL CONTEXT, DECISION**

#### **HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

From the point of view of armaments, the Vietnam War is the major conflict of the XXth century. This conflict opposed the United States of America and the North Vietnamese communist Viet Minh, supported by the Soviet Union. This conflict became an exported war between the planet's two superpowers: The USA supposedly wanted to halt the spread of communism in Asia whilst the USSR wished to encourage it.

Vietnam was sacrificed, in a terrible human carnage, a laboratory of future wars .

3 to 4 times the tonnage of bombs dropped during the entire second World War were used, the equivalent of 450 Hiroshima atomic bombs. Vietnam bears the stigmata of twenty million large craters - high explosive, incendiary, blast, cratering and fragmentation bombs. There are more than half a million tons of unexploded ordinance. These devices have already killed between 100000 and 200000 people, especially children because for a long time more then half of the population was less than 15 years old. At Cu-Chi - which means « Land off steel » in Vietnamese - more than 10 tons per inhabitant were dropped.

America was bogged down.

The Vietnamese combatants, invisible and elusive, moved about under their tropical forest. The American army archives admit to 8 000 000 sorties with helicopters full of napalm to flush out the enemy from his villages of straw huts.

To no effect.

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America was in a hurry. Her youth and that of the whole world were beginning to react against the war. The Americans were promised the moon, in Vietnam they were going to create it.

## DECISION

In 1961 J.F. Kennedy entered the White House and decided in favour of this gigantic chemical war that was initially called « Operation Trail Dust », before turning out to be « Operation Hades » - god of the dead and hell in Greek mythology. It was then quickly renamed « Operation Ranch Hand », because that sounded less important. It was the third military code name in history for the spraying of Agent Orange on Vietnam and the bordering areas of Laos and Cambodia. « Operation Ranch Hand »'s aim was to raze the tropical forest from the face of the earth as well as poisoning the crops, the inhabitants and the combatants, a titanic ecocide which was to eliminate for ever many earthly species.

## 2)QUANTITIES, METHODS, COMPOSITIONS, EQUIVALENCES.

### QUANTITIES

It took ten years to spray 84 000 000 litres of defoliants.

### METHODS

Ten percent was spread by hand, by land based vehicle or by boat in the deltas and mangrove swamps of the coast. Ninety percent was sprayed by air, using C123 planes and helicopters. At that point the Vietnamese had no other protection than a cloth soaked in urine held over the noses.

### COMPOSITION

Amongst these defoliants were Agent Blue containing cyanide , which was particularly effective at destroying the rice fields, Agent Green, Agent White, Agent Purple, Agent Pink, according to the species to be destroyed, and finally Agent Orange, so called because of the coloured bands on the barrels containing the poison. Agent Orange alone represented 62% of the defoliants sprayed in Vietnam.

Agent Orange contains tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin, called 2,3,7,8-TCDD because of its molecular structure. Dioxins consist of 2 benzene rings, 2 molecules of oxygen and 2 molecules of chlorine, fluorine or bromine (4 for the most toxic variety).

TCDD is the most powerful poison known - a million times more toxic than the most potent natural poison - and also the most long lasting.

### EQUIVALENCES

An equivalence is not a scientific measure as it uses a fact to make a comparative projection, but nevertheless it can concentrate the mind in order to apprehend the magnitude of the disaster. A study made in 2002 by the University of Colombia, New York, reveals that 80 grammes of dioxin released into the water supply of a town, would kill 8 000 000 of its inhabitants. On this basis, 40 billion times the fatal dose for a human being were sprayed on Vietnam.

## 3) STABILITY, FOOD CHAIN, CELL DAMAGE

### STABILITY

TCDD dosage is measured in picograms, i.e. in million millionths of a gram (10 to the power of 12 gram). This smallness guarantees it great stability. In Vietnam it is in the soil, in the water, in the mud, in the silt and it in this way it passes into the food chain.

### FOOD CHAIN

In the food chain it is found in large quantities in animal fats, meat, milk, eggs and fish.

Scientists have created a unit called the TEQ, short for Toxic Equivalence, in order to fix the toxicity limit for foodstuffs. In France, the permitted dose per kilo of body weight per person per day is from 1 to 4 picograms a day.

In the USA the permitted dose is much smaller, at 0.0064 picograms it is 160 times less than the French norm.

In Vietnam, the dose can reach 900 picograms per kilo of body weight per person per day.

### CELL DAMAGE

The nucleus of a cell is protected by a defensive membrane, whose role is to prevent molecules that do not have the necessary structure from penetrating the nucleus and interfering with the genetic material. But within the cell's cytoplasm (all the components of the cell except the nucleus) dioxin binds to a molecule naturally present in all cells - the aryl hydrocarbon receptor. It can then penetrate the nucleus's defences by 'passing itself off' as a hormone. It is this dioxin-receptor combination that confuses the hormonal messengers of our endocrine system (the collection of endocrine glands that secrete hormones into the blood) and activates the so called 'dioxin sensitive' zones of certain DNA regions, thus producing the toxic effect.

## 4) UNSEEN CONSEQUENCES, ILLNESSES.

### UNSEEN CONSEQUENCES

The Vietnamese are fervent ancestor worshippers. They wish to have offspring capable of perpetuating this cult. If this is not the case, they experience a feeling of guilt towards their ancestors. It is understandable that families with one, two or three seriously handicapped children have had a fourth, fifth and sixth, and sometimes more... It is thought that a large number of births are not registered, the children are 'hidden'. One has to understand the appalling mental torture of parents, who see their child born with two heads or two faces on the same head, or without arms and legs, or even with internal organs outside their bodies.

And even when TCDD does not manage to cross the future mother's placenta and the child is born healthy, the mother poisons it by breastfeeding because mother's milk is the only way for her to eliminate dioxin. Once again think of the devastating psychological effect on the mother.

### ILLNESSES

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Even seemingly healthy people often suffer from dermatoses (chloracne, skin disease characterised by blackheads, cysts and papules; hyper-keratosis, hyper-pigmentation)

Liver disorders.

Cardio-vascular disorders.

Urogenital tract disorders.

Neurological disorders (loss of libido, migraines, peripheral neuropathies, sensory organs)

Psychiatric disorders (nervousness, insomnia, loss of personality, depression, suicide).

Following the industrial accident in Seveso involving dioxin, the Professor Bertazzi and his team from Milan declared : "We are beginning to observe some strange long term effects... a study has revealed a complete reversal of the sex distribution. In the population as a whole, there is a ratio of 106 males for 100 females, but in Seveso it is 48 girls for 26 boys. That is a sign of profound mutation of hormonal metabolisms." The masculine sex has almost half disappeared.

Today in Vietnam, the third generation is there and healthy people are producing monster babies with, in some cases, their genitals in the middle of their faces.

### **5)"REPARATION", SCIENTIFIC PROOF, UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION, MULTINATIONALS, JUSTICE.**

#### **« REPARATION », SCIENTIFIC PROOF**

The Stellman Report, which is the undisputed reference on the use of defoliants in Vietnam, estimates at 4 800 000 the number of potential or silent victims of the spraying. But caution, this figure does not take into account victims subsequently poisoned for forty years by the food chain or the offspring of three generations who have followed them to this day. There are millions of past and present victims. How many are there to come?

The use of this indestructible chemical Weapon of Mass Destruction by the American Army demands 'reparations' « We need scientific proof » say the Americans, who have recognized and compensated 'their' Vietnam War veterans, affected by Agent Orange as well as their offspring. It is a way of letting Vietnam deal with the problem on its own. At the time of this American reply, a test to detect dioxin in the blood cost between \$3000 and \$4000. How could a Vietnam trying to ensure its development afford such a cost? The link between cause and effect is recognized for certain illnesses and the list gets longer every year. It is high time to recognize all the illnesses and malformations attributable to Agent Orange. In fact the body of presumption is sufficiently well founded. Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian victims present the same symptoms as the American Vietnam War victims (4 200 000 GI's served in Vietnam), as the South Koreans (300 000 participants) and the New Zealanders and Australians, who fought beside them as well as the victims, who live near the storage zones in the Philippines, not forgetting certain persons, who live near the Agent Orange test zones in Canada. The same applies to all their offspring. Naturally we have to continue to study the harmful consequences of these poisons, but it is high time to recognize the obvious. Additionally, unlike the majority of the victims quoted, the Vietnamese have been living and feeding on the poison for forty years.

## CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

The United States Constitution does not permit legal action against the politicians of the day nor against acts of war committed by the American Army, even if they are not « allowed » by the Geneva Convention.

## MULTINATIONALS

The manufacturers of the poison are still there. They were fully aware of the composition of their product and its destination - as early as 1965 American laboratories had discovered the effects of dioxin on rats - and made a huge fortune supplying the US Army. Of the 37 companies that made the poison, the main ones are Monsanto, Dow Chemical, Uniroyal, Diamond, Thompson and Hercules amongst others.

## JUSTICE

On the 31st of January 2004, a few days before the expiry of the ten year statute of limitations, which would have prevented any legal action under US law, the Vietnam Association for the Victims of Agent Orange/dioxin and 5 victims acting on their own behalf filed a lawsuit at the United States Federal Court in Brooklyn New York. In September 2004 22 more victims joined the list which risks becoming endless.

The Vietnamese lawsuit involves a vast and complex procedure. It is vast because there are many plaintiffs, many accused and many events that took place over a long period. There will be social, economic and financial implications. The trial will be complex both from the point of view of the applicable and the theoretical jurisdiction. The trial of those involved with Agent Orange will be a first in the history of the American legal system and has no precedent.

On the 10th of March 2005, Judge Jack Weinstein, the same one who defended the American veteran victims of Agent Orange and obtained damages for them, dismissed the lawsuit of the Vietnamese victims! The judge said there was nothing in International Law outlawing the use of herbicides. Apart from the fact that defoliants did not exist when certain laws were drawn up, the real question is not to know whether the Agent Orange sprayed on Vietnam was a poison or a defoliant, the real question is to know whether the defoliant contained a poison. "YES" is the overwhelmingly unanimous reply of the international scientific community - a devastatingly teratogenic (causing malformation of the embryo) poison.

The 30th of September 2005, the Vietnamese victims filed an appeal to the Appeals Court.

The 16th of January 2006, the defence lawyers of the 37 companies submitted their arguments to 'their' justice. Their defence claimed that the reason for the use of Agent Orange was to protect American soldiers and that they had also been victims of Agent Orange as well as their children. The defence added that the companies could not refuse an order from their government, as if each one was obliged to supply the ingredients of a crime against humanity. Thus the defence tried to shift the responsibility onto the politicians of the time knowing that the latter had either disappeared or were constitutionally untouchable.

The New York Court of Appeal will pronounce its judgement in the first half of 2006, towards the end of May or the beginning of June.

This huge violation of human rights, this war crime, this crime against humanity, this titanic ecocide combined with a delayed action genocide, has today become the greatest forgotten tragedy astride the two centuries. If the

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Vietnamese victims' case is again dismissed, it will be a second injustice for the world. Impunity would close the door for ever to future plaintiffs (I'm thinking of the victims of Depleted Uranium) and would open wide the way to future great massacres in this young millennium. Finally, if the Agent Orange victims' complaint is rejected, we will appeal to the United States Supreme Court which as everyone knows has recently undergone significant renewal.

Today the Rally for International Disarmement must form another bridge between the victims and international opinion which we wish to alert. For the victims, our fellow creatures, are enduring particularly horrible physical and psychological suffering. The children of Vietnam are smiling like children everywhere in the world, but in spite of all the efforts of the authorities, more than forty years after the beginning of the spraying of Agent Orange, the children of Vietnam are dying and nobody cares.

Thank you.

**P.S.** If you wish to visit Vietnam, go ! In the current state of affairs, it is only long term exposure which is dangerous. Don't be afraid to go to Vietnam for a fortnight, a month or even two. And of course, they have one of the best cuisines in the world and you will come back enchanted, full of undying memories.