

The Scourge of Agent Orange



GLOBAL COMMUNITY
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At the rear of a small village store in the Cam Lo area of central Vietnam the destructive effects of Agent Orange are distressingly evident.

Sisters Nguyen Thi Tai, 25, and Nguyen Thi Thuyet, 20, are sprawled on a spare rattan bed, tended closely by their mother, a virtual around-the-clock occupation.

They have almost no control over their limbs. They cannot talk or recognize their own names. They can only eat liquid foodstuffs and gurgle in hoarse voices when they are hungry.

They should have clean diapers three times a day, but the family of Nguyen Van Bong cannot afford such an extravagant outlay.

Medically, the girls suffer from spina bifida, spinal deformity, which was diagnosed a few months after their births and which can also lead to severe neurological problems.

The father, who served as a soldier in Laos in 1981-85, mother and four other children, do not suffer any problems highlighting one of the problems in dealing with the after effects of agent orange—why the defoliant affects some people and not others and when it will even strike.

In a nearby compound, all four children of 65-year-old Tran Thi Dan, three boys and a girl, suffer from symptoms local officials say are the results of Agent Orange. Unlike their nearby neighbors, these children can walk with a struggle and their father has built a set of parallel bars in the courtyard to encourage them to regain the use of their limbs.



GCSF program officer Olivia Fernandez and agent orange victim in Cam Lo district
Photo: Ray Wilkinson



A fulltime mother's job caring for two sisters, victims of agent orange
Photo: Ray Wilkinson

Her husband used to work on the forests along the Vietnam-Laos border during and after the war and they were subject to repeated defoliation efforts.

The Cam Lo region and greater Quang Tri province area in central Vietnam suffered widespread defoliation campaigns during the 1960s and 1970s and there are unknown (ARE THERE ANY ESTIMATES HERE???) numbers of victims.

After years of neglect and denial they are beginning to receive increasing amounts of attention and help, but the overall need remains desperate.

The Washington-headquartered Global Community Service Foundation, which has been involved in community health and education projects in the region for many years, hopes to raise funds to directly help this group.

According to GCSF local director Nyugen Xuan Tam, such funding would help to establish a rehabilitation center where children would undergo training and instruction and which would allow parents such as those of the girl twins to devote more time to working and earning a salary. Funds would also promote income generation projects for hard-pressed parents, help to train them in therapy methods and equip their homes with simple devices to more effectively help the handicapped family members.