



Agent Orange Lives on in Vietnam, Poisoning Children and Ruining Lives

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While [Le Ba Thuan](#) was recruiting soldiers for the Viet Cong during the Vietnam War, he would watch American planes spraying herbicide and try to avoid the contaminated areas. He never quite succeeded and for the past fifty years he has suffered from heart disease, high blood pressure, constant headaches, and skin rashes.



Le Ban Thuan (right) was exposed to Agent Orange. His daughter, Le Thi Hang, has been paralyzed since birth.

But compared to his family Thuan is lucky. His first daughter died of nose cancer. Another child died with severe birth defects. A third miscarried. Thuan's fourth child, Hang, is epileptic, blind and paralyzed from the neck down (photo left). The only members of the family to escape the catastrophe are Thuan's two sons and wife.

Thuan and his family are among millions of Vietnamese suffering from dioxin poisoning caused by the deadly herbicide Agent Orange. They were also among 500 victims who were surveyed in August by the [Association for the Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities \(AEPD\)](#), a Vietnamese advocacy group, and The Advocacy Project (AP). AEPD and AP will use data from the survey to develop a program of support for their families.

[Between 1961 and 1971](#) US planes dropped 11.4 million gallons of Agent Orange across a quarter of South Vietnam. The dioxin found its way into the human food chain, affecting Vietnamese and Americans who were exposed and family members. At the same time, the poison strikes in an arbitrary manner, making it difficult to establish a direct link to individual cases, particularly second and third generations. For example, no one can explain why Thuan's two boys were spared while his daughters have been stricken.

In addition, while the US and Vietnam have created a [Dialogue Group](#) to deal with Agent Orange, most US funding has gone to cleaning up heavily contaminated "hotspots" around former US air bases. Advocates would like to see more spent on Agent Orange victims, without discriminating against people with other forms of disability.



[Pham Van Giang](#), a former navy captain (left) has suffered from dizziness and headaches since being exposed to Agent Orange. His son, [Phan Van Dung](#) (right) has serious muscle complications and cognitive disabilities.

The AEPD-AP survey was designed in the spring, with help from [Rebecca Scherpelz](#), a former Peace Fellow and disability expert. The first objective was to establish whether the victim or a family member served in the south during the war and suffers from one of the conditions associated with dioxin poisoning. These are the two criteria used by the US and Vietnamese governments in awarding compensation to veterans. The questionnaire then assessed family needs.

AEPD trained a team to interview 500 individuals and their families in two districts of Quan Binh province, where AEPD operates.

[Peace Fellow Seth McIntyre](#), from AP, helped AEPD with training and profiled families through powerful blogs and photos.

The survey shows that the challenge facing Vietnam is not limited to the south. [According to the Aspen Institute](#), 3,800 gallons of Agent Orange were sprayed on Quang Binh province (compared, for example, to the 1.8 million gallons dropped around the former US air base of Bien Hoa). But many fighters, like Thuan, went south from Quang Binh and ingested the poison before returning home. According to the Vietnamese Red Cross, around 3 million Vietnamese are affected throughout the country.



Ngo Mau Duc and his wife Pham Thi Choc served in the war. They suffer from many medical complications.

The Vietnamese government offers financial compensation, but the needs are so great that many families surveyed are not covering the cost of medical treatment. Thuan and his daughter receive the equivalent of \$126 a month. Another veteran, [Pham Van Giang](#), was also exposed but lost his military papers and receives only \$28 for his handicapped son Dung. Another victim sold his house to raise \$6,000 to have part of his stomach removed.

But families remain steadfast and loving, as Seth notes in a poignant [blog about Thuan](#): "Because Hang is completely immobile by herself, Thuan and his wife must carry her to their pit latrine multiple

times per day. They bathe her, feed her, massage her, and play the radio for her-soft Vietnamese ballads, the only thing that seems to calm her through the night."

AP's involvement in this project has been led by AP Board member Scott Allen, and inspired by Peace Fellows who have worked at AEPD. In 2012, [Jesse Cottrell](#) produced a [powerful video on Agent Orange](#) and helped AEPD produce squares for the [Vietnam Disability Quilt](#), which describes the impact of climate change on Vietnamese with a disability. In 2013 [Kelly Howell](#) produced profiles and research.



Li Thanh Duc, an Agent Orange survivor. His daughters Li Thi Phuong, Li Thi No and Li Thi Linh have severe cognitive and physical disabilities.

Their work has brought Peace Fellows face to face with real suffering. Seth reports on a visit to the home of a former sea captain, [Pham Van Giang](#), whose son Dung is severely handicapped: "The sight of me (a white, Caucasian, American male) sends Dung into a frenzy. He cries out in Vietnamese, 'Don't let him arrest me! Don't let him arrest me!' A fully grown man thrashing his arms and screaming. No one in the family treats this behavior as out of the ordinary, yet I am growing increasingly uncomfortable. However, Giang looks on, softly assuring me: 'It's OK, just wait.'"

*** Families featured in this post asked that their photos be used**

- Donate top right and support our work with victims of Agent Orange in Vietnam
- Visit the website of the Aspen Institute for [background on Agent Orange](#)
- Read the [blogs of Jesse Cottrell](#)
- Watch Jesse's [video profile of the Phan Siblings](#)

- Read the [blogs of Kelly Howell](#)
- [Read the blogs](#) and [view the photos](#) of Seth McIntyre
- View the [Vietnam disability quilt](#).