

Trade Wars: Monsanto's Return to Vietnam

The Push for the Trans-Pacific Partnership, "Liberation Day" Celebrations, and New Initiatives in the Struggle Over the Toxic Legacy of Agent Orange

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Ho Chi Minh City.

This past week, as activists gathered in Washington, D.C. for the conference on "Vietnam: the Power of Protest," in Viet Nam's Ho Chi Minh City, a delegation led by Veterans for Peace (VFP) Chapter 160 was quietly wrapping up a two week tour. The tour was timed to coincide the VFP's national "[Full Disclosure Campaign](#)". The VFP initiative, like the D.C.-based conference over the weekend, is geared to counter a Department of Defense (DOD) campaign, funded by the 2008 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), to produce commemorative events and historical accounts, including school curriculum, to mark the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War.

Set against the backdrop of the Obama administration's push for fast track authority to conclude the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), this year's VFP 160 tour raised troubling questions not only about the ongoing effects of the war on Viet Nam, but about Monsanto's introduction of genetically modified (GMO) seeds onto the Vietnamese market. The text of the TPP, which would be the largest trade deal in history, impacting 40% of the world's economy, remains shrouded in secrecy. But [leaked passages](#) indicate that the TPP will heighten the growing income inequality in both Viet Nam and the United States and override local and national laws and policies geared toward protecting the environment and public health. Monsanto, one of the single largest producers of the estimated 20 million gallons of Agent Orange sprayed in Viet Nam between 1961 and 1971, is among the corporations that stand to garner windfall profits if the TPP is passed.

Widespread contamination from the dioxin-laced defoliant Agent Orange (AO), and a landscape littered with unexploded ordinance (UXO)—including landmines and cluster bombs—are among the legacies of what's known in Viet Nam as the "American War." One of many troubling aspects of the Pentagon's 50th anniversary campaign is its Orwellian spin on a high tech war that bathed Vietnamese jungles and waterways in toxic defoliants in one of the largest, most reckless scientific experiments in human history. Among [five objectives](#) outlined in the NDAA is the mandate that the DOD history celebrate "advances in technology, science and medicine related to military research conducted during the Vietnam War".

The leaders of the VFP tour, including Chapter 160 President Suel Jones, Vice President Chuck Searcy, Don Blackburn, Chuck Palazzo, and David Clark, all served in the American War in Viet Nam and each returned, drawn by their memories of the war and their desire to

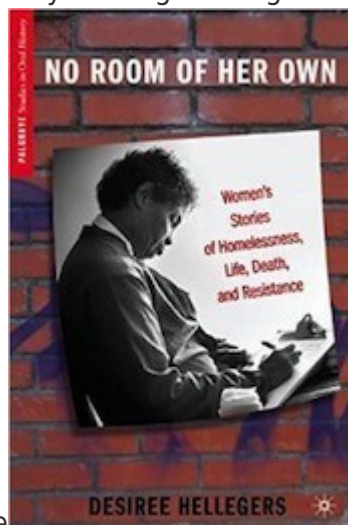
help support Vietnamese NGOs working to address the suffering engendered by the war. With the leadership VFP Chapter 160 ranging from their late sixties to early seventies, the vets anticipate that, at best, they'll have another five years to lead the tours, their primary fundraising vehicle to cover their limited administrative expenses and provide support for their partner organizations.

The day after we arrived in Viet Nam, on April 17, a class action lawsuit was filed in France on behalf of millions of Agent Orange affected Vietnamese. The lawsuit was filed against Monsanto and 25 other U.S.-based manufacturers of dioxin-contaminated Agent Orange. After years of legal skirmishes, [a 1984 settlement](#) provided limited relief to American GIs suffering from a range of health effects linked to Agent Orange exposure, from prostate and lung cancer, to multiple myeloma, diabetes, Parkinsons and heart disease. But attempts to get legal redress and financial support for the estimated three million Vietnamese suffering from Agent Orange exposure have repeatedly failed.

The U.S. has never made good on the promises Nixon made at the 1973 Paris Peace talks to provide Viet Nam with more than \$3 billion in reparations, equivalent in today's currency to more than \$16 billion. The relatively paltry aid that the U.S. has supplied the still war-ravaged country comes with string attached: ongoing pressures to enact various forms of "structural adjustment," which the TPP seems designed to accelerate.

On the same day the lawsuit was filed in France, we met with U.S. Ambassador Ted Osius, the first ambassador since the "normalization" of US-Viet Nam relations in 1995 to openly acknowledge the lingering effects of Agent Orange on the Vietnamese people. By some accounts, the two-decade embargo that the U.S. imposed on Viet Nam after the war exacted suffering equal to the war itself.

Osius told the gathered delegation and journalists that meaningful political relations between the U.S and Viet Nam necessitate "facing the past." "If we hadn't addressed the Agent Orange issue, I don't think we'd have the credibility to address" other shared concerns, chief among which he numbered climate change, global health, education and trade. Osius vaunted the virtues of the TPP and the "huge benefits" it will provide for Vietnamese workers, while ostensibly strengthening environmental protections and



regulations governing food safety. He acknowledged, however, that alongside the benefits that Viet Nam is enjoying from the liberalization of trade in recent years, the country has witnessed the emergence of a new Vietnamese oligarchy. And he also acknowledged the role that the TPP will play in privatizing state institutions, which under the terms of NAFTA and the WTO, are frequently relegated to the status of unfair

trade barriers. Under the TPP, he told us, “non-performing state institutions will,” of course, be subject to elimination. When I challenged Ambassador Osius’ claims about the benefits of the TPP, invoked the secrecy of the document and invited him to print out and share a copy of the trade deal with the delegation to substantiate his claims, he declined diplomatically.

On our way to visit Village, a program situated at the outskirts of Hanoi, serving Agent Orange-affected children and veterans, we saw scenes that have become familiar in U.S. cities bent on attracting global investment at all costs. “Development” in Viet Nam, as in the United States, is increasingly code for housing demolition and displacement. Along the edges of Hanoi, which is now home to one Rolls Royce and four Mercedes Benz dealerships, luxury condominiums are springing up, along with sporadic protests. The tensions between “development” and the revolutionary vision and promises of Ho Chi Minh’s Communist Party, are set in stark relief in Doan Hong Le’s 2010 film [*Who Owns the Land*](#). The award-winning film documents the struggles of poor farmers confronting displacement by a luxury golf course, along with rationalizations from their local Communist Party leadership.

In each city along the path of the tour—from Hanoi to Hue, to A Luoi, Danang, Na Tranh, and Ho Chi Minh City—we saw evidence of the ongoing suffering engendered by the war. And in each city, we met with members of the Veterans Association of Viet Nam (VAVN) along with local chapters of the Vietnamese Association of Victims of Agent Orange (VAVA) which has long been at the forefront of the struggle for legal and financial redress for Vietnamese disabled by AO-exposure. At a meeting in Hanoi with VAVN, our host Gen. Phùng Khắc Đăng, invoked the role of American corporations in the production of Agent Orange, taking care to acknowledge that AO has had “very terrible effects not only on Vietnamese but on U.S. soldiers and citizens.” At a meeting in Danang, standing before a bust of Ho Chi Minh, a VAVA representative remembered “seeing the planes come and the foliage die.” Another representative chimed in: “It destroyed anything with leaves. It kills us. It kills the people. It kills all the trees and animals.” But the focus, he reminded us—and himself—must be on “how to rebuild the country, how to develop the country.” Regarding the war and the U.S. use of Agent Orange, he went on to say, “We just turn the page, [but] we don’t delete it.”

“We appreciate the generosity of the Vietnamese people,” responded VFP 160 Vice President Chuck Searcy, “But we also think we should learn the lessons of the past.” Searcy wanted to know why, after the tragic consequences of Agent Orange, the Vietnamese government has allowed Monsanto to return, open offices and trade in Viet Nam, where the company now markets GMO seeds, including corn. In response, the VAVA representative invoked Viet Nam’s entry into the WTO. “When we signed up for the WTO, we had to take them—they have to be here,” he said.

If the WTO relegated local and national environmental and health laws to the status of “unfair trade barriers,” Mexico’s experience following the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) ought to serve as another cautionary tale about the likely impacts of the TPP on Viet Nam. Following passage of NAFTA, the U.S. flooded Mexico with cheap American corn, including Monsanto’s GMO strains. The move not only gutted the Mexican corn market, it resulted in widespread GMO contamination of the country’s diverse indigenous corn strains. In Canada, as Naomi Klein has documented, the WTO and NAFTA have been used to challenge, respectively, the development of local renewable energy in Ontario, and a moratorium on fracking in Quebec. Leaked portions of the TPP indicate that the trade agreement will only expand the profits and corporate impunity that Monsanto and other corporations have long enjoyed.

The human health effects caused by the use of dioxin-contaminated Agent Orange during the American war are most dramatically evidenced in the province of Quang Tri, in the area the U.S. demarcated as the demilitarized zone or DMZ. One of an estimated 28 “hot spots” scattered throughout Viet Nam, many of which were the sites of US bases where Agent Orange was transported and stored, Quang Tri was the most heavily sprayed province. An estimated 15,000 people in Quang Tri suffer from Agent Orange exposure. Our first encounter with the nearly unthinkable damage that Agent Orange has wrought in Viet Nam came during a visit to a family that receives support from VFP 160 and its partner organization Project RENEW. Four out of five adult children in the family are severely disabled. Only the second of the couple’s children, born between 1972 and 1985, seems, along with his own children, to have dodged the chemical bullet of Agent Orange. However, as the Vietnamese are increasingly discovering, the effects of Agent Orange may skip one generation, only to emerge in the next. The four disabled adult children are unable to stand upright as a result of a host of congenital health issues. They scurry about on all fours, with puzzled expressions that are markers of the developmental disabilities that frequently result from AO exposure. In Quang Tri Province, we learn, 1300 families have between 3 and 5 children who suffer from the debilitating effects of Agent Orange exposure.

But Agent Orange is far from the only source of misery that remains in Quang Tri Province. If the U.S. dropped more bombs on Viet Nam than were used throughout World War II in both the European and Pacific theaters combined, Quang Tri was the most heavily bombed region in Viet Nam. The range of prosthetic devices on display at the Quang Tri Mine Action Visitor Center reflect Project RENEW’s work to meet the needs of more than 900 individuals province-wide who have received prosthetic devices following injuries from UXO, which is scattered across an estimated 80% of the Province. Another 1,100 amputees are currently awaiting limbs. Also on display at the Center are crayon drawings by Quang Tri children learning in school-based programs to identify unexploded ordinance and notify authorities of the location. More than two million Vietnamese combatants and civilians were killed during the American War, but the more than 60,000 Vietnamese killed by land mines, cluster bombs and other UXO since the war now exceeds the 58,000 American GIs killed during the war. And still the US remains one of only a handful of countries worldwide which have refused to sign on to UN treaties banning landmines and cluster bombs.

In Nha Trang, we visited a woman and her sister who are caring for two adult children, neither of whom registered signs of AO-exposure until their late teens. The older of the two, now 40, lay moaning in a bedroom in the rear of the house. His 36- year-old sister is still cognizant enough to anticipate her own future when she sees his emaciated and contorted limbs.

In Ho Chi Minh City, our final stop on the tour, we visit the Tu Du Hospital/Peace Village, which is home to some sixty AO-affected children, along with a handful of adults who have grown up at the facility. On the ward, a couple of children eagerly demanded to be hugged, while others, some with feeding tubes in their noses, looked at us with uncomprehending gazes. A child at the far end of a room stared blindly in front of him. Like many AO-affected children, one of his eyes was entirely missing, a blank space where a socket might be. In another room, a hydrocephalic child of indeterminate gender with a head the size of a watermelon lay motionless in a crib. Perched in a chair beside the crib, cradling the child’s hand, sat a girl who appeared to be no more than six or seven years old. She glanced up momentarily, a bit annoyed perhaps by the crowd of American spectators trooping through, then returned to the all-consuming work of comforting her friend.

The following day, April 30th, the anniversary in the U.S. of the “fall of Saigon,” we rose early to attend “Liberation Day” festivities in Ho Chi Minh City. The tightly choreographed parade featured male and female veterans in dress uniforms; sunflower-swirling school girls; and a billboard size image of Ho Chi Minh atop a hot pink float-silhouetted like a modern day pop culture saint against a celestial blue backdrop. Entirely absent from the scene was any hint or interest or participation from the rank and file residents of the city named after the revolutionary figure.

The reception that followed in the “Reunification Palace” was presided over by Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, and attended by about 100 people representing organizations from 40 countries and territories around the world. First among the speakers was H  l  ne Luc. As Phuc noted, Luc “support[ed] and assist[ed] the Vietnamese delegation” at the Peace Talks, while serving as a member of the Paris City Council. In her comments, Luc invoked Ho Chi Minh’s historic 1945 Declaration of Independence, modeled after the founding document of the United States. She lauded the courage and bravery of the revolutionary struggle, and of the activists who took to the streets around the world to stop the war.

Last to speak when the floor opened up was Virginia Foote, President of the U.S.-Vietnam Trade Council and President of the Board of the International Center in Washington, D.C. “As an American—and I think I speak for all of the Americans in the room,” observed Foote, “we pledge to continue to work on the economic development of the country” as well as “on the war legacy issues.”

She spoke of attending the ground-breaking ceremony at the Land Mine Action Center in Hanoi only a few days before and of the “new money [that] is coming in,” to “support and assist Viet Nam.” “At the same time,” she said, “we are working on some very tough trade negotiations and hoping we can finish those this year as well....We will continue to struggle forward with the TPP,” she said, before the Deputy Prime Minister offered a few ceremonial comments to conclude the meeting.

On April 30th in the United States, with little fan fare, California Representative Barbara Lee introduced the Agent Orange Victims Relief Act of 2015. The bill, supported by the U.S.-based Vietnam Agent Orange Relief and Responsibility Campaign (<http://www.vn-agentorange.org/>), would provide funds to substantially mitigate AO contamination throughout Viet Nam, and for health care and direct services for Vietnamese AO sufferers. It would also expand relief for American veterans, and provide new support for their children, who suffer from AO-related congenital health problems.

Amid new initiatives to secure justice for Agent Orange survivors and ongoing negotiations for a trade deal that stands to significantly shape the future of both countries, the corporate controlled media in the U.S. has been only too willing to offer up a steady diet of cinematically compelling footage of South Vietnamese forever scrambling toward helicopters and hanging from rooftops. Leaked passages indicate that, if passed, TPP will expand the impunity and profits of corporations like Monsanto that seem every bit as willing today as they were in the 1960s to profit from the misery of Vietnamese peasants and the working poor in both countries. Meanwhile, in Viet Nam, the work of VFP 160 and its partner organizations continues, and in Ho Chi Minh City's Peace Village sits a little girl who refuses to be distracted, to loosen her grip or turn her back on the suffering that surrounds her.

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