

## Agent Orange and the Legacy of the Vietnam War: Living Disabled

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Swiss Red Cross

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*To be both handicapped and poor is the situation of several million Vietnamese. Through social programmes and income-generating schemes, the Red Cross assists this vulnerable group and their families. Among the beneficiaries are victims of Agent Orange, a powerful defoliant whose deadly effects still linger more than 30 years after the end of the war.*

Day has just dawned, and all seems well in Dong Nai province: green paddy fields shimmer under the early morning sun, a host of colourful craft jostle for space in the floating markets, bicycles and mopeds criss-cross the countryside. But the beauty of the countryside cannot hide the poverty of most of the people who live there, especially those who are disabled. This is the case of the Dao family. They live in the village of Phu Hun, some 60 kilometres north of Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon).

### History catches up

The destiny of 60-year-old **Dao Trung Dinh** and his 56-year-old wife **Trần Thị Nhõ** traces Viet Nam's recent history. While he was serving in the South Vietnamese army, his wife-to-be was cooking for Vietcong resistance fighters. This did not prevent them meeting at the end of the war 30 years ago: their union symbolized, on a private level, the political reunification of the two Viet Nams.

Despite having survived the atrocities of the war, Dao Trung Dinh and his wife did not avoid the war's cruel legacies. Four of their eight children were born with malformations and died soon after. Of the four others, two are handicapped: for 15-year-old Trung Lanh, the first signs of paralysis appeared five years ago. Today, he is confined to his bed, his limbs completely atrophied. As for their 25-year-old daughter **Thi Thanh Hong**, she has a motor disability and suffers from asthma.

The family lives in constant fear that the two other girls, so far spared, might in their turn develop a disabling illness. Thanks to the programme run by the Red Cross for destitute handicapped people, Thi Thanh Hong was able to undergo surgery on her legs and do a sewing course. Today, she is able to supplement the family income, which comes mainly from selling lottery tickets in the street.

### The war's legacy

The Dao family's misfortune has a name: Agent Orange. Both mother and father were directly exposed to this highly toxic defoliant — dioxin — sprayed in large quantities by the

United States forces during the war in the 1970s. They are in no doubt that the chemical is to blame for the premature death of their children and the disability of the other two. Agent Orange entered the food chain and caused untold congenital disabilities. To this day, many children are born with severe handicaps. True, statistical proof is lacking and medical research in this field is still in its infancy, but the fact remains that the concentration of deformities and severe handicaps among newborns during and after the war, as well as the above average incidence of cancers of different kinds among adults and former combatants would suggest a strong correlation with the use, during the war, of dioxin and other lethal chemicals. The Vietnamese Red Cross estimates that 150,000 children are handicapped as a result of Agent Orange, a significantly higher number than their adult counterparts.

### **A pioneering Red Cross programme**

Improving the long-term quality of life of severely handicapped people, ensuring that their families have a regular income, paying for the education of disabled children and providing them with a home and medical assistance: these are some of the ambitious goals of the Red Cross's assistance programme for destitute handicapped people, including victims of Agent Orange. This pilot community project is implemented in the rural areas of the country's ten provinces. Most importantly, it is run in close cooperation with the local branches of the Red Cross, which need support in carrying out activities in their communities. The level of vulnerability of the family is the main criterion for selection; the cause of the handicap, whether it be Agent Orange or something else, is secondary. Launched four years ago, the programme, endowed with US\$ 900,000, has to date assisted more than 4,000 families or 17,000 people. It also benefits from the financial support of the Swiss and American Red Cross.

### **Assistance to ensure subsistence**



**Dang Tih Thu Van** is 41 years old. He lives in the same village as the Dao family. Born during the war without legs, he has great difficulty getting around. When he was born, the first sprayings of Agent Orange had already taken place, but the link with his deformity cannot be clearly established.

The Red Cross has provided him with a boat and a fishing net, tools which allow him a basic level of self-sufficiency. The purpose is to help destitute people like him to have a basic minimum to live by, independently of the cause of their infirmity, explains American Red Cross delegate Marcie Friedman, who directs the programme with dynamism and professionalism.

The needs are identified directly with the people concerned so as to define the type of aid

best-suited to each individual situation. In this way, 20-year-old Hoi Xa from the village of Huan Hung, who is blind, was able to learn Braille, and her family, who lives from farming, was given a cow to boost its income in the long term. Other families have received one or more pigs as part of the programme or have been granted a loan at advantageous rates to build a new house.

### **A mother's burden**

“When she was three, our daughter Thanh Quan had a very high fever, rapidly followed by symptoms of paralysis. Within two years, she had completely lost the use of her limbs; her body refused to obey the slightest command. The doctors said they could do nothing. Now Thanh Quan is 14, and I have to look after her as if she were a baby.” The voice of Ngô Thi Ngoc, her 37-year-old mother, is steeped in sadness. The suffering of her daughter, whom she carries in her arms, is also her own: places in daycare centres for severely handicapped children are cruelly lacking in Viet Nam. The families, most often the mothers, carry the burden alone.

The four younger children are in good health. Thanks to the intervention of the Red Cross, Thanh Quan can receive, in the event of an acute attack, ambulatory treatment at the regional hospital, but the medicines do not come free. For her father, a self-employed electrician, tools donated by the Red Cross are a precious lifeline.

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*Featured image: The Red Cross of Viet Nam offers medical and social assistance to disabled people in Dong Nai province.*

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