

Speech by Sue Kedgley to the International Conference of the Victims of Agent Orange, Hanoi, March 28 2006

Like hundreds of thousands of people around the world, my first political act at age 18 was to take part in protests against the Vietnam war and New Zealand's involvement in it.

Like so many young New Zealanders at the time I was horrified that our government was supporting the United States intervention in the Vietnamese civil war and the protests that raged against the war in New Zealand raised not only my political awareness but the awareness of a whole generation of New Zealanders, and helped to ensure that New Zealand pulled out of the war in 1970 and has never since become involved in another foreign war of occupation.

Despite this New Zealand, like Vietnam, has not been able to close that sorry chapter in our history, or to leave behind the toxic legacy of our involvement in that war.

For decades New Zealand veterans who had fought in the war complained of a range of ongoing health problems that they believed were caused by their exposure to Agent Orange and other toxic defoliants that were sprayed over the Phuoc Tuy province where most New Zealanders were based. Successive governments dismissed or denied their claims –as well as the claim that some of the chemicals that were used in Vietnam were manufactured in New Zealand.

But finally in 2004, more than three decades after our involvement in the war, Parliament's Health Select committee conducted an inquiry into the health effects of New Zealand veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange. As a result of our inquiry our government formally apologised to veterans for the failure of successive governments to acknowledge that they had been exposed to a toxic environment in Vietnam.

The government acknowledged the ongoing health effects of Agent Orange and other defoliants and took some further steps to ensure free medical and other assistance to veterans suffering from health effects, and for veterans children who suffered from spina bifida, cleft palate or glandular cancer. New Zealand veterans continue to campaign for further compensation and assistance for their children.

But our government has not yet apologised to the Vietnamese people for its involvement in the Vietnam war. Nor has it accepted its moral responsibility, as a participant in that pointless and destructive war, to help the Vietnamese victims of Agent Orange.

Having fought alongside the Americans in Vietnam, I believe New Zealand, Australia and South Korea all have a strong moral responsibility to help solve the enormous and ongoing humanitarian and environmental problems we helped to create. All of our governments have an equal responsibility, I believe, to champion this issue internationally and to put pressure on the United States government to admit its responsibility for the damage it has caused the Vietnamese by its use of toxic defoliants, and to compensate for that damage.

It is frankly scandalous that having sprayed an estimated 80 million litres of Agent Orange and other defoliants over Vietnam, the United States government has done nothing to help rehabilitate or compensate the millions of Vietnamese victims and continues to deny it has any moral or legal responsibility for the ongoing humanitarian crisis it has created in Vietnam.

The US government offers free medical treatment to American veterans who fought in Vietnam for a range of illnesses. Yet it refuses to give any assistance to the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese who suffer from exactly the same illnesses.

It is scandalous too that while foreign soldiers who fought in Vietnam got some financial compensation as a result of a 1984 court case, while hundreds of Vietnamese whose lives have been destroyed by Agent Orange and other lethal chemicals have never been compensated for their suffering.

Equally scandalous in my view is the silence—almost a conspiracy of silence—of governments around the world about this issue. Presumably out of fear of getting off-side with the Americans, most governments—my own included—refuse to speak out about this issue and have effectively turned a blind eye to the humanitarian tragedy that is still occurring here in Vietnam. It has become one of those tabu subjects that governments are reluctant to discuss. Let's face it, it is an uncomfortable issue, involving mass chemical poisoning and second and third generations of children are born disfigured and deformed—the sort of uncomfortable issue that governments would rather sweep under the table.

But we must not let them do that.

Fourteen months ago on a visit to Vietnam I saw for myself the suffering of Vietnamese children whose parents or grandparents were exposed to Agent Orange and other defoliants. Their faces and their courage haunts me to this day. I only wish that George Bush, Helen Clark and John

Howard could visit the Friendship village and meet those children too. Perhaps that experience would touch their hearts and prick their consciences and galvanise them to take some action to help them.

It is because of those children that I have travelled from the other side of the world to be here today. It is because of those children that we must galvanise world opinion and demand that the US compensate the Vietnamese people for the ongoing effects of Agent Orange. In the final analysis I believe it is only the power of international opinion –or an international court of law—that will finally force action to resolve this issue. I fervently hope that this conference and the appeal that will emerge from it will play an important part in making that happen.