

SOCIAL AND HUMAN SCIENCES
IN THE SERVICE OF THE VICTIMS OF AGENT ORANGE/DIOXIN SPRAYINGS

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M. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

L'association d'amitié franco-vietnamienne (AAFV), the France-Vietnam friendship association, thanks the organisers of this conference very sincerely for their kind invitation and wishes the conference all the best for a fruitful working time in favour of the victims of Agent orange.

President Gendreau being unable to attend the conference, which he regrets and requests you to excuse, I am in charge of representing our association in Hanoi. She is an elderly lady, aged 45, and she keeps a close connection with our elder sister, the Vietnam-France Friendship association (AAVF), aged 50.

After yesterday meeting, I could not decide whether I was here as a social worker or as a social scientist. So I shall talk from both points of view : first about activities in support of the victims and then about the kind of help the victims could receive from social sciences.

I shall begin with the point of the state concerning the mobilization and the solidarity with the victims, in France and Europe, so far as a limited information permits.

1- What is new since last year ?

In March 2005 was held in Paris the International Conference on the effects of sprayings of defoliants in Vietnam, organized by our association. It brought together scientists from many countries, since together with Vietnamese, American, Canadian and French specialists , friends of Sweden (Al Burke, the organiser of the Stockholm conference), Germany, Great Britain, Switzerland, and of many other countries gathered in the Senate House. The French and the Vietnamese press provided a good coverage and gave a large echo to its conclusions. The proceedings are being prepared and will appear in the form of a CD within a few weeks. At the time of the Conference we also published a book intended for non specialist readers, L' Agent orange au Vietnam, crime d'hier, tragédie d'aujourd'hui [Agent orange in Vietnam, a crime yesterday, a tragedy today], the translations of which in Vietnamese, English and Italian will be available very soon. The Paris conference was an important stake in awakening consciousness of the drama - and the scandal- of sprayings of agent orange among broad fractions of the population, in France and also in Vietnam itself and in the international public opinion. For us, it has been also an opportunity to fasten links with other Friendship societies in Europe and that gave way to some shared initiatives and a few days ago, to the creation of a permanent network for information and action : The Vietnam Link.

Paris Conference was followed by several demonstrations of support :

- in Paris, April 30, for the thirtieth anniversary of the reunification of Vietnam, a demonstration took place in front of the Pompidou Center, thanks to the Collectif Vietnam-dioxine, which links a dozen French organisations in support of the victims.
- on August the 10th, Len Aldis presented the American ambassador in the United Kingdom with the first 692.867 signatures collected throughout the world on the petition he wrote and launched on the web the year before. (Len did many other things I let it to him to explain).
- in Paris and in several other French cities, on October 1, the day following the deposit of the Appeal of the victims at Brooklyn Court, orange balloons were released, carrying a message to the People of America, and calling for justice for the Vietnamese victims.
 - the same demonstration took place in Hanoi, along lake Hoan Kiem, on October 23, under the presidency of Madame Nguyen Thi Binh and of Mr Tran Xuan Thu, on the initiative of our Italian friend Doctor Enzo Falcone.
 - at the beginning of November, in connection with Veterans Day in the United States, marked in particular in San Francisco by a parade in favour of the American and Vietnamese victims of the agent orange, demonstrations with collect of signature on the international petition launched by Len Aldis took place in Paris, Stockholm, Madrid, La Coruna, Santiago de Compostela, etc.
 - in November also, a delegation of the Vietnamese victims led by Mr Nguyen Trong Nhan, vice president of the VAVA, toured the USA. It had a considerable repercussion in the American and international media.
 - At the same time, thanks to the association Vietnam-Les enfants de la dioxine, took place the european tour of the young virtuoso player of unicord, Nguyen Thanh Tung, a dioxine victim and a wonderful exemple of courage and a talent conquered against adversity.
 - in December, Madame Nguyen Thi Binh, together with M. Tran Xuan Thu and M. Buy Ba Binh visited Europe to comfort the energies of the victims' supporters and rise an increasing activity concerning the law suit in Brooklyn. M. Trinh Ngoc Thai joined them in Paris This was no doubt a climax for the recent period.

The delegation went to Montpellier, where she met our local committees, and to Marseille where she took part in the EPASEV conference "L'Agent orange au Vietnam, crime d'hier, tragédie d'aujourd'hui", which dealt in particular with the question of vocational training and professional situation of handicapped persons. After travelling in Italy and latter in Britain, the delegation came back to Paris, where she met Vietnam Friendship societies from Germany, Switzerland Spain, and Belgium, and of course AAFV and UGVF. On that occasion, the European societies proposed some ideas, one of them being the network, and others of which I shall speak in my second point. I had been appointed Mrs. Binh maid of honor for the duration, a great honor for me I am sure !

- Then, on March 6th we had the Salon de l'Agriculture [Agricultural Fair] in Paris. This is a very traditional and very popular event. The Collectif Vietnam-dioxine was there, with tracts accusing Monsanto, responsible for Agent orange making and also for the Genetically Modified Organisms development. The public and the Farmers Unions proved to be very sensitive to both crimes and a great number of signatures were collected on the petition.

As a conclusion of this first part, on activities, I think that mobilization is increasing, that imagination as well as determination are there and that it is possible to increase the public

opinion pressure in order to gain justice for all the victims of Agent orange. We AAFV promise to do our best to contribute.

2- My second point deals with social sciences : can social sciences contribute in helping the victims ?

The Paris conference was followed by many scientific sessions, first in Paris just after the conference and then in Hanoi, as an initiative of VAVA : on one side, there has been a meeting of natural scientists, chemists and biologists, on the other side meetings of lawyers. As for the human and social sciences, they were not left aside in Paris and in the following months, they have been a concern for our association and other European associations, both from theoretical and practical aspects.

From a theoretical point of view, we see that the sprayings affected specially hardly the ethno-linguistic minorities living in the mountain and in the highland Plateaux. These people have lost not only their health but their traditional way of living, their culture, their humanity. They lived in close sympathy with their natural environment, inhabited by beneficent or dangerous forces, according to what is usually called an animist belief. They lived in the forest, with the forest , which fed and protected them. Their world has collapsed. It is necessary that researches, fundamental and applied, are made in anthropology, but also in psychology, in sociology and in other sciences to study this situation, to make it known, to analyse the consequences of such a drastic change and to consider the means of remediation, so far as can be done.

Many of the Agent orange direct victims, soldiers or civilians, have suffered a war trauma. Some of them are in a condition which calls for a moral, a psychological support to soften the wounds

Heavily handicapped children are born, generation after generation. This adds to the war burden and sometimes turns to an exhausting fight the lives of parents which are themselves suffering from poor health or are handicapped. Anyone who has met them can be aware of the anxiety this persons undergo, in spite of their courage facing the most terrible difficulties : their childrens' future, the doubt concerning the children to be born latter, are a dreadful burden for them . In addition, poverty, not to say misery , in spite of the allocations given as much as possible, makes the moral distress harder to bear.

Therefore researches, fundamental as well as applied, are necessary to increase the quality and the quantity of the assistance to the victims. All resources from remediation methods, western as well as Vietnamese must be used to reach this goal and the linking, the complementarities between them must be straitened by appropriate adaptations, still to be done in most cases.

Some situation could be bettered, or even totally overcome, by remediative surgery. But the greater number of victims has to be considered as live-long handicapped persons, whose fate can be alleviated by increasing their motor and perceptive skills, and by creating favourable conditions for the social activities, among which the professional ones, that they are able to have.

I think we can draw a few conclusion from the experience we got trough 20 years working with the Vietnamese Red Cross :

- They are extremely diversified situations, and this calls for a large panel of methods in remediation.

- insertion or reinsertion in social life is a great help for alleviating the victims sorrow and giving them back some pleasure in life.
- financial self-sufficiency is a most important goal to reach, and not only from a purely economical point of view ; hence the importance of vocational training and search for employment, preserved or not.
- finally, one has to consider not only the victim (or victims) but the whole family and its needs. This is obvious, of course, when dealing with persons who take care of children or relatives reduced to a vegetative state.

Much has been done by Vietnamese themselves and that must be known and made public much more than it is.

-Some prestigious establishments, like the Van Canh Friendship village or the Peace Villages are examples of remarkable achievements. They are a lighthouse for the victim's supporters, a symbol and a permanent appeal to international solidarity. But owing to financial reasons, they cannot be duplicated all over Vietnam. Besides, they have the drawback of isolating the patients from their usual surroundings, and this is not favourable to the permanency of improvements when they go back home.

-Many functional rehabilitation centers exist, due to various initiative from Vietnamese authorities and organisations, such as the one I visited a few days ago in Kien Xuong district, in Thai Binh. They do a wonderful work either as care centers, day-hospital, short time boarding places, advice centers, etc. The AAFV considers them as extremely interesting institutions, and wishes they could be multiplied. This supposes that they are supported by an integrated global development program for the help to Agent Orange victims, ranging from first –line workers training to international advanced research.

The Friendship associations which gathered in Paris last December sketched a project meeting this program which has been proposed, as a first draft, to Madame Nguyen Thi Binh and to Mr Tran Xuan Thu. Since then, we continued working on it, together with other organisations. I hope I shall be able to tell you more about it next time we meet.
Thank you for your attention.