FORD FOUNDATION/ASPEN INSTITUTE
AD HOC CONSULTATIONS ON A TRACK II PROCESS
ON AGENT ORANGE/DIOXIN

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VIETNAM

Summary Notes of Ad Hoc Consultations

Following site visits in Da Nang and Thai Binh provinces, the Vietnamese and American delegations assembled in Hanoi on February 14 for discussions chaired by Susan Berresford, President of the Ford Foundation. The Vietnamese delegation was led by Madame Ton Nu Thi Ninh, Vice-Chairwoman of the External Relations Committee of the National Assembly and also included Bui Thi Giang, Director-General of the People-to-People Relations Department of the Commission for External Relations of the Community Party of Vietnam; and Professor Vo Quy of the Center of Natural Resources and Environmental Studies at Vietnam National University. The American delegation was led by Walter Isaacson, President of the Aspen Institute and included Governor Christine Todd Whitman, President of the Whitman Strategy Group; and William Mayer, Senior Partner of Park Avenue Equity. The group was assisted by Charles Bailey, Ford Foundation Representative for Vietnam and Thailand and Catharin Dalpino, Visiting Associate Professor of Southeast Asian Studies at Georgetown University. The dialogue was off the record, but to convey the substance and sense of discussion, these minutes identify speakers by nationality.

Vietnamese and American Attitudes and Impressions

The discussion opened with remarks from American participants on the meetings and observations of the preceding days. The attitudes of the Vietnamese they met who had been affected in some way by dioxin, and those who worked to help them, were surprising by their apparent lack of an accusatory spirit, of bitterness or resentment toward Americans. As one American summed it up, “We felt we were among friends.”

American participants agreed that these attitudes, which one contrasted to the more “litigious, finger-pointing” approach to problems often found in the United States, incline Americans to want to help Vietnamese find solutions to the problems presented by dioxin. The most obvious of these (and perhaps the easiest to address) is the clean-up some Americans cautioned that because there is at present no large-scale scientific evidence of a direct correlation between the individual health problems the group observed and dioxin, joint efforts in this area are likely to remain voluntary in nature and carried out under the category of humanitarian assistance.
A Vietnamese discussant offered one explanation for the tolerance displayed by many Vietnamese the group had met. In the twentieth century, Vietnam lived in genuine peace only in the last six years. Prior to 1994, the country had faced colonization and World War II, the war of resistance against the French, the American war, the conflict with China and the economic embargo. Although Vietnam prevailed in military conflicts of the century, it found that “winning can be a disaster.” With this complicated history, Vietnamese culture treats the past as past, and this enables Vietnamese to view Americans as friends.

The Continuing Impact of Agent Orange/Dioxin on Vietnam

Another Vietnamese participant cautioned that the non-accusatory approach of many Vietnamese to the issue of dioxin should not be allowed to mask the severity of the problem. He estimated that nearly 28,000 Vietnamese have health problems related to the use of herbicides during the war, but only 7,400 get modest government assistance (200,000 dong per month). In recent years, about a hundred die each year of dioxin-related disorders, many of them young. Roughly 2 million hectares of land were destroyed by spraying during the war, but 10 million more were affected to a lesser degree.

Vietnam is only beginning to be able to attach monetary amounts to this damage. The cost of cleaning up a single base is estimated at $10 million. It costs $300-600 USD per hectare to replant damaged hectares. However, these estimates do not adequately reflect the economic damage done to the lives of people living in or around these affected areas.

The Effect of Dioxin on Vietnam-US Relations

A Vietnamese group member pointed out that the very fact that Vietnamese and Americans were sitting together to discuss the problems of dioxin was evidence that the Vietnam-US relationship was maturing. Although Vietnamese culture emphasizes looking forward, it would be inaccurate to say that the legacy of the war—and the dioxin issue in particular—does not affect Vietnamese attitudes toward the United States.

The participant believed that the experience of the past three decades suggests that Vietnamese are often more comfortable being on good terms with former adversaries than are Americans. In addressing war issues, US priorities have put American POW-MIA’s first, and war legacies on the Vietnamese side have been a lesser priority. The US Government has been somewhat comfortable addressing landmine and other UXO issues, and in recent years, US veterans have begun helping Vietnam account for its own missing. In this issue area, Agent Orange/dioxin has been the most difficult to address, not only because of the extent of damage but also because of the nature of the problem: the cross-generational aspects of health effects; the longer timeframes of dioxin’s impact; and the economic consequences for the afflicted, their families and communities.
The participant explained that, at the same time, Agent Orange/dioxin has only become a mainstream issue in Vietnamese domestic public affairs in the last ten years. Immediately after the war, public attention was focused on the need to assist war widow and find employment for youth re-integrating into society. At this juncture, however, dioxin as a domestic issue in Vietnam and as an issue in Vietnam-US relations now intersect and reinforce one another. However, the Vietnamese government is still in the process of prioritizing needs in the population of citizens affected by dioxin, and this must be coordinated with the foreign policy process.

The Current US Policy Environment

An American discussant agreed that Agent Orange has been a “fringe” issue in US policy toward Vietnam to date, but offered reasons that this treatment of the issue could be changing, and that the impact of dioxin on Vietnam could become more “mainstream”:

- The formal process of political and economic normalization has been largely completed, and has helped to build the scaffolding for a stronger bilateral relationship.
- International attention to the campaign to eradicate landmines in the 1990 brought other war legacy issues into focus in activist communities;
- Educational efforts by Vietnamese, American and international advocates of dioxin remediation have begun to have an impact on individuals in the US policy community, who are taking the initiative to raise the issue. In recent months, the current US Ambassador has departed from previous US diplomatic practice and raised the issue of dioxin in meetings with American groups. The Vietnam-US Joint Statement issued by Presidents Triet and Bush in Hanoi last November mentioned dioxin for the first time. The first proposed earmark for assistance for bases clean-up and dioxin-related disabilities appeared in US draft legislation at the close of the last Congress. Each of these milestones has helped to strengthen a cautious momentum on the dioxin issue.
- Paradoxically, because the dioxin issue has been considered “fringe,” it may be easier to move on it when there is the political will to do so than if it had a higher profile.
- Two major developments in the US policy community are serving to raise Vietnam’s profile in Washington: the Iraq war, and comparisons to Vietnam; and the 2008 Presidential race. With respect to the latter, Vietnam could be a sub-text of the campaign in some scenarios, for example if Senator McCain were to run against Senator Clinton.
- Emerging Vietnam-US security cooperation, although cautious and
incremental, is becoming more central to the bilateral relationship. American policy-makers are beginning to see linkage between cooperation with Vietnamese armed forces on bases clean-up and forward movement in security relations

Assessing and Prioritizing Needs

The dialogue members discussed the full range of remedies required in the dioxin issue area. Broadly speaking these include:

- "Hot spot" remediation, primarily through bases clean-up and treatment of surrounding civilian areas;¹
- Advancing scientific research to support joint efforts to address dioxin issues;
- Strengthening the capacity of the Vietnamese health community to identify dioxin-intense areas and affected populations;
- Addressing human suffering caused by dioxin exposure, especially the genetic effects and the disorders associated with them.
- Reclaiming Vietnamese landscape and other aspects of the environment affected by dioxin spraying;
- Educating the American public and US policymakers on the continuing impact of dioxin in Vietnam, in order to “mainstream” this issue in US policy.

These tasks comprise a long-term and potentially expensive agenda and should be pursued with close attention to a division of labor among the various actors, both governmental and non-governmental. Initiatives should highlight and build upon existing initiatives. For example, a Track Two effort can pursue advocacy to “mainstream” dioxin issues in US policy and sponsor pilot efforts in other issue areas, which can presumably be taken up in government-to-government cooperation and by international organizations. As well, it can help raise funds from major donors for big-ticket tasks.

In reviewing this list, the dialogue group concluded that landscape restoration projects and major humanitarian aid programs targeting individuals affected by dioxin were most likely beyond the reach of a Track Two group. More appropriate are (1) advocacy efforts; (2) training programs; (3) targeted research that supports policy (or, in the words of an American participant, “that moves research from the scientific

¹ Rapporteur's note: Although not discussed at the Hanoi meeting, during the site visit to the Da Nang airbase, Vietnamese military officers raised the need for greater information-sharing between the United States and Vietnam on dioxin spills on former US bases. Vietnamese officers had heard anecdotal accounts of spills from US veterans and believed that a more systematic effort to collect these accounts could provide useful information.
community into the realm of common sense”); and (4) “tourniquet” efforts that can help alleviate pressing problems as larger-scale efforts are being negotiated.

**Developing an Action Agenda**

Under these guidelines, the dialogue group proposed a six-part agenda to be implemented over a period of eighteen months to two years. This effort will be implemented by a Track Two group, the US-Vietnam Dialogue on Agent Orange, with the Aspen Institute serving as the project secretariat. The dialogue will continue to be chaired by Susan Berresford.

The primary activities to be pursued under this initiative include:

1. **An incidence study of disabilities in Vietnam related to dioxin exposure, conducted by a consortium of international researchers.**
   
   The purpose of the study will be to map disabilities in affected areas, to provide baseline data on incidence for use by policymakers, assistance officials, advocates and interested others. This near-term effort will use existing data where available and appropriate. Participants favored a comparative approach. In that respect, some members believed it would be useful to compare data from Vietnam, the United States and a third country. Others thought that the comparisons should be drawn from other Southeast Asian countries, where dioxin was neither sprayed nor stored. It will be important for researchers to have sufficient profile in the international community and to employ internationally accepted methodologies. With the help of Vietnamese dialogue group members, the consortium will obtain the full concurrence of the Vietnamese government. One American participant believed that researchers from the Tulane University School of Public Health might take a leading role in the study and offered to consult with the school.

   (This activity would be overseen by the Aspen Institute, with the assistance of Aspen’s public health program officer.)

2. **Immediate efforts to support dioxin clean-up on bases and surrounding communities.**

   To encourage momentum in government-to-government cooperation, “tourniquet” efforts are required to stem continued exposure to dioxin. These might include physical infrastructure, such as fencing around “hot spot” areas, and a focus on the human aspects of exposure. Private efforts can move more quickly than government ones and may, for example, be able conduct some activities before the monsoon season (when dioxin spreads more quickly through water). At present, joint efforts are focused on Da Nang, but other sites, such as Bien Hoa, have not received as much attention.

   (This basket of activities would be conducted with the approval and cooperation of the Vietnamese Government’s Committee 33.)
3. **Support for treatment and education centers for victims of dioxin-related disorders in two key provinces.**

Building on existing efforts, this activity would strengthen cooperation among educators, health and social workers, and local government officials, to expand and improve the services offered disabled Vietnamese thought to be afflicted by dioxin exposure and their families. Efforts will be made to help make these centers as self-contained as possible and offer (beyond basic services) community outreach, income-generation training and activities, health support and respite care for parents, etc.

Potential target provinces include Thai Binh, Quang Nhai or Quang Nam.

4. **Development of a Vietnamese laboratory for dioxin testing.**

The time and expense involved in sending samples for dioxin testing to other countries severely limits the ability of Vietnamese scientists and health officials to map dioxin exposure in local communities and apply appropriate treatments or remediation. Beyond building the laboratory itself, the project will focus on local sustainability for the lab's continued operation. Participants offered various estimates of the start-up costs, ranging from $1 million USD to $7 million. Potential donors might include the Gates Foundation or the Atlantic Philanthropies. International partners in building the lab could be the American Academy for the Advancement of Science or the Hatfield Consultants.

5. **"Training of trainers" in environmental clean-up for dioxin-affected forest and other land areas.**

Although major reforestation or other landscape restoration projects are beyond the scope of the US-Vietnam Dialogue on Agent Orange/Dioxin, the program can encourage an exponential effect with training courses. These could focus on special considerations in the use of land affected by herbicides; community participation, etc. Courses will be offered in provinces such as Quang Nhai but can be replicated for other affected areas. These activities may also draw donor attention to specific areas for larger-scale restoration efforts.

6. **Education and advocacy in the US policy community to build mainstream support for US government and civil society responses to Agent Orange/dioxin in Vietnam.**

This cluster will aim to build and maintain momentum in this issue area while also taking advantage of key timing (e.g., the visit of Vietnamese President Triet to Washington in the early summer of 2007; the spring Congressional budget cycle, etc.). Overseen and implemented by the Aspen Institute, sample activities include:

- An expanded Track Two dialogue on dioxin, alternating between US and Vietnamese venues;
A media strategy – op eds, interviews, etc. – aimed at raising awareness of Agent Orange issues in Vietnam, and in US-Vietnam relations; (in this aspect, some participants believed it is important to be responsive to press issue but not overly proactive in seeking press attention;

Roundtable discussions on Agent Orange for members of Congress and high-ranking US executive branch officials (e.g., on the occasion of President Triet’s visit);

Encouraging Congressional committees to conduct hearings on dioxin, offering testimony at hearings, etc.

Dialogue with government agencies (e.g., State Department, Department of Defense, Environmental Protection Agency) on their roles in remediation of dioxin in Vietnam; (includes preparation of talking points for discussions with policymakers, e.g., Secretary of State)

Outreach to the Vietnamese-American community on dioxin issues and their role in US-Vietnam relations.

Immediate Follow-Up

The Aspen Institute will establish the Secretariat for the US-Vietnam Dialogue on Agent Orange/Dioxin and will prepare a menu of advocacy activities for the next few months;

Aspen will map and contact interested US organizations for collaborative efforts and potential donations to project activities;

Aspen will convene discussions with Tulane and other potential research partners to launch incidence study;

Vietnamese delegation members will brief appropriate groups and officials on intended project activities;

Ford Foundation will contact individuals/organizations to discuss funding and implementation for Vietnam-based activities (e.g., disability centers in provinces; training of trainers on environment)