NEW YORK, 20 June 2007 – More than thirty years after the mountains and coasts of south and central Vietnam were sprayed with millions of gallons of Agent Orange and other toxic herbicides by US military forces, a joint American-Vietnamese humanitarian initiative has been launched to support the growing movement to resolve this remaining legacy of the war.

The joint initiative comes just days before Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet is scheduled to visit the White House on the first visit of a Vietnamese head of state since the conflict ended.

The US-Vietnam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange/Dioxin, funded by the Ford Foundation, brings together seven eminent policy makers, scientists and business figures from both countries to develop practical responses to the continuing human and environmental consequences of Agent Orange use during the war. Heading the Vietnamese delegation is Madame Ton Nu Thi Ninh, Vice Chair of the Vietnamese National Assembly’s Foreign Affairs Committee. Other delegates are Professor Vo Quy, Vietnam’s leading environmentalist and Bui The Giang, a senior public policy specialist. Walter Isaacson, CEO of the Aspen Institute, leads the US delegation. He is joined by former Governor Christine Todd Whitman, who also served as cabinet secretary for the Environmental Protection Agency, and William Mayer, President and CEO of Park Avenue Equity Partners. Susan V. Berresford, President of the Ford Foundation, chairs the group.

The Dialogue Group is a non-government initiative that aims to build a collective, bipartisan humanitarian response where diplomatic discussion alone has proved difficult. It builds on work done by the Vietnamese themselves, the Ford Foundation in Hanoi as well as the State Department and the Environmental Protection Agency to address dioxin contamination throughout Vietnam. The Dialogue Group will spearhead five initiatives to address the issue.

"The time is right for our two countries to come together to address this legacy and to mainstream discussion of this unresolved issue," said former EPA chief Christine Todd Whitman. "We have brought together a group of experts committed to meeting the challenges posed by dioxin contamination and to making a difference to the millions of people whose lives have been irrevocably affected."

In the 1960s, 20 million gallons of Agent Orange and other herbicides were sprayed by the US to destroy the forest canopy and flush out adversary forces. Decades later dioxin, one of the world’s most toxic chemicals and a key ingredient of Agent Orange, is still present in the environment, particularly in the soil around former US military bases. There have been a worrying number of birth defects, cancers and health problems among both American troops and their families and generations of Vietnamese veterans and civilians.
“Dioxin has had a profound impact on Vietnamese society. The effects of the toxin have carried over into successive generations; families and livelihoods have been devastated and the environment has been tainted in a number of localities,” said Madame Ninh, Vice Chair of Vietnam’s Foreign Affairs Committee. “Concerned citizens of our two nations need to work together to address the legacy of the war. We need to combine our expertise to reduce the harm and provide services to those affected.”

In an effort to build a collaborative approach between government, civil society and donors, the Dialogue Group has identified five priority areas to be tackled over a two year period. They include:

1. Support of dioxin clean-up at former US military bases and health and livelihood programs for surrounding communities. Measures are being taken to assess the extent of the contamination, prevent dioxin from seeping into surrounding areas and up the food chain, provide support for affected communities, and prepare for clean-up. Later phases include the actual clean-up of dioxin and restoration of soils.

2. Support for treatment and education centers for victims of dioxin-related disorders. This initiative aims to strengthen cooperation among educators, health and social workers, and local government officials to improve services available to individuals whose disabilities are thought to be related to dioxin exposure, as well as to their families and communities.

3. Development of a Vietnamese laboratory for dioxin testing. Sending blood and soil samples abroad for testing severely limits the ability of Vietnamese scientists and health officials to respond to the needs of communities and map levels of exposure. The project will also develop the local skills and expertise needed to sustain the enterprise.

4. Training courses for local communities. These would focus on environmental restoration of land affected by herbicides in south and central Vietnam.

5. Education and advocacy to build support for ongoing efforts. The Dialogue Group will strive to build and maintain the momentum needed to finally resolve issues related to Agent Orange and will engage with government, civil society and other donors in an effort to strengthen and expand solutions.

Outlining the approach taken by the Dialogue Group, Walter Isaacson, leader of the US delegation and CEO of the Aspen Institute, said, “We hope to rise above the old politics of this issue and work in a practical and humanitarian way to tackle the many challenges that remain.”

Over the last seven years the Ford Foundation, which has been at the forefront of efforts to address the issue of Agent Orange/Dioxin, has made grants worth $4.5 million for dioxin-related projects. The Foundation plans to allocate a fulltime staff position and a further budget of $7.5 million to this work over the next two years.

“The Dialogue Group is a perfect example of how non-profit, government and business leaders can work together to find common, compassionate responses to seemingly intractable issues,” said Susan V. Berresford, President of the Ford Foundation. “Our efforts to help address the impact of Dioxin reflect core values embedded in our mission: to reduce poverty and injustice, promote international cooperation, and advance human achievement for people everywhere.”
Dialogue Group - US Members
Walter Isaacson, President and CEO, the Aspen Institute
William Mayer, President and CEO, Park Avenue Equity Partners & Chairman Emeritus, Board of Trustees, the Aspen Institute
Christine Todd Whitman, President, Whitman Strategy Group

Dialogue Group - Vietnam Members
Madame Ton Nu Thi Ninh, Vice Chair, Foreign Affairs Committee, National Assembly of Vietnam
Mr. Bui The Giang, Director General, People to People Relations Department, Commission for External Relations of the Communist Party of Vietnam
Prof. Vo Quy, Center for Natural Resources & Environmental Studies, Vietnam National University, Hanoi

Ford Foundation
Susan Berresford, Convener of the US-Vietnam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange/Dioxin

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The Ford Foundation is an independent, nonprofit grant-making organization. For more than half a century it has been a resource for innovative people and institutions worldwide, guided by its goals of strengthening democratic values, reducing poverty and injustice, promoting international cooperation and advancing human achievement. With headquarters in New York, the foundation has offices in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Latin America, and Russia. For more information about the Ford Foundation, go to www.fordfound.org.

The Aspen Institute, founded in 1950, is an international nonprofit organization dedicated to fostering enlightened leadership and open-minded dialogue. Through seminars, policy programs, conferences, and leadership development initiatives, the Institute and its international partners seek to promote nonpartisan inquiry and an appreciation for timeless values. The Institute is headquartered in Washington, DC, and has campuses in Aspen, Colo., and on the Wye River on Maryland's Eastern Shore. Its international network includes partner Aspen Institutes in Berlin, Rome, Lyon, Tokyo, New Delhi, and Bucharest, and leadership programs in Africa, Central America, and India.

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