

Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns

NewsNotes

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Agent Orange legacy: U.S. moral responsibility

War casualties in Vietnam continue 30 years after hostilities ended, as health officials there attribute more than one million cases of cancer, birth defects and other abnormalities to the residual effects of Agent Orange.

The U.S. used chemical weapons for nine years during the Vietnam War to defoliate trees and curtail food production. More than 3,000 villages were sprayed, putting two million to four million people directly at risk.

The U.S. military suspended its use of Agent Orange in 1971 after the component dioxin was linked to cancer. Nonetheless, the U.S. officially denied any connection for years, even though 10,000 U.S. veterans receive disability benefits related to the herbicide.

(In December 2001, President Bush signed a bill that presumed for the purposes of health benefits that every U.S. veteran who served in Vietnam was exposed to Agent Orange. Roughly 2.7 million U.S. soldiers served in Vietnam and Southeast Asia during the war years.)

Vietnam blames Agent Orange for more than 150,000 cases of birth defects and other health problems. However, the U.S. has insisted on verifiable figures, saying that the regime blocked scientific studies by outside researchers.

“You can’t just say, ‘There’s a bunch of malformed babies, it must be Agent Orange,’ There’s a lot of hard scientific work to be done,” says Dr. Arnold Schecter of the University of Texas-Houston School of Public Health.

Schecter, who has conducted research in Vietnam since 1984, says dioxin persists in the environment and still enters the food supply in Vietnam. The highly toxic chemical increases in intensity as it moves up the food chain.

A new study by the Columbia University School of Public Health, reported in the April issue of the journal *Nature*, could help verify Vietnamese claims. Based on a re-examination of military records, the study found the U.S. sprayed 21 million gallons of defoliants, or 10 percent more than previously thought.

Providing medical care to those thought to be victims of Agent Orange is a major financial burden. Two rehabilitation centers in Hanoi and Haiphong expend about \$150 per child, a year’s income for many in Vietnam. Meanwhile, the U.S. Veterans Administration gives more than \$1,000 per month to former U.S. soldiers exposed to dioxin.

The long-term threat posed by Agent Orange was illustrated during a conference last year in Hanoi. Researchers reported extremely high levels of dioxin in the blood of residents of Bien Hoa, a heavily sprayed area near a former U.S. airbase, more than 30 years after the spraying had ended.

Researchers said some of the highest levels — more than 200 times greater than average — were found in people born well after the spraying had stopped. Schecter estimates there are as many as 30 dioxin “hot spots” like Bien Hoa in southern Vietnam.

Dr. Le Cao Dai of the Vietnam Red Cross says 85 to 90 percent of the dioxin detected in Vietnamese came from contaminated food. He explains that, after an area was sprayed, the dioxin from Agent Orange contaminated organic matter in soil as well as river and lake mud. Humans were exposed to dioxin when they consumed contaminated animal, fish or shrimp products.

Many Vietnamese, as well as U.S. veterans, blame dioxin contamination not only for birth defects and cancers, but also for miscarriages, heart problems and diabetes.

Vietnam agreed not to press claims for compensation when U.S.-Vietnam relations were restored in 1995. However, the question of moral responsibility for potential lingering effects of Agent Orange remains.

Even as the U.S. and Vietnam prepared to begin joint studies on the effects of spraying on health and the environment, Vietnam’s foreign minister issued an urgent plea for assistance.

“(H)undreds of thousands are struggling with deadly diseases including cancer, mental disabilities and birth defects,” Nguyen Dy Nien told an NGO meeting last year in New York. “Tens of thousands of Vietnamese children, who are the offspring of victims of Agent Orange, are disabled, deformed, and mentally retarded.”

“Victims of Agent Orange and dioxin cannot wait for research outcomes,” he concluded. “They need material support to survive.”

“Independence” difficult to define

While billions of dollars have been spent purportedly to free the Iraqi people from tyranny, many other territories in the world still await their independence even though it could be granted without the burden of war.

The United Nations is urging self-determination for 16 non-self-governing territories, mostly archipelagoes, administered by France, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States.

In 1960 the UN General Assembly declared that subjecting a people to foreign domination violates human rights, and it resolved to bring “to a speedy and unconditional end colonialism in all its forms.” The following year a special committee was established to make recommendations on the implementation of that declaration.

The object of UN concern is fewer than two million people in American Samoa, Anguilla, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Falkland Islands (Malvinas), Gibraltar, Guam, Montserrat, New Caledonia, Pitcairn, St. Helena, Tokelau, Turks and Caicos Islands, U.S. Virgin Islands and Western Sahara. The territories range in size from five square kilometers (Pitcairn) to 266,000 (Western Sahara).

However, independence movements in other territories suggest that the UN list could be expanded. For example:

- After a ten-year civil war on Bougainville, Papua New Guinea last year granted the resource-rich island limited autonomy with a possible ballot on secession after 10-15 years.
- Human rights watchers have asked the UN to reexamine its endorsement of a 1969 referendum in West Papua, in which there was no dissent to the territory’s being incorporated as Indonesia’s 26th province.
- Curiously missing from the UN list is Tibet, which lost its political and religious freedom with the invasion of Chinese forces in 1951.

Efforts to expand the UN list of non-self-governing territories could meet opposition in the General Assembly, however, even among the so-called Special Committee of 24. An independent Tibet, West Papua or even Bougainville would likely be resisted by China or Indonesia, both current members of the committee charged with overseeing the movement away from colonial status.

The road to independence is usually long and, often, violent. The UN declared a Second International Decade for the Eradication of Colonialism (2001-2010) precisely because so little was achieved during the first decade. In 1994 Palau became self-governing in free association with the U.S. (East Timor became independent in 2002.)

Much more is at stake than nominal independence, however. Recently independent small states find themselves grappling with stronger adversaries over serious issues such as:

- Demand for compensation for harm to health and environment from U.S. nuclear tests on Bikini, Enewetak and other atolls of the Marshall Islands (independent in 1986)
- Research into possible radiation-induced disease in Fijian soldiers and others who witnessed British nuclear tests on Malden Atoll, Kiribati (independent in 1979)
- Possible lawsuit by Tuvalu (independent in 1978) against the U.S. or Australia for contributing to global warming, which is raising ocean levels and threatens to submerge the country’s nine coral atolls
- Controversy surrounding the Australian policy of sending asylum seekers to Papua New Guinea (independent in 1975) and Nauru (independent in 1968) (see *NewsNotes*, September/October 2002)

Human rights watchers, such as the Pacific Concerns Resource Centre in Suva, Fiji Islands, criticize colonial powers’ use of “short-term delaying tactics” to frustrate peoples’ desire for freedom. The PCRC includes free association, integration, trusteeship and special autonomy among those tactics.

No doubt the meaning of self-determination and its implementation will continue to be debated by both the UN and individual governments. While the will of the people should be consulted, it might be difficult to define a voting constituency at times.

Meanwhile, the PCRC is advocating the addition of at least five geographical areas to the UN list of non-self-governing territories: Bougainville, French Polynesia, Easter Island, West Papua and Ka Pae’aina — more familiar to most North Americans as Hawaii.

Iraq: Greed versus fear for U.S. oil companies

Since the U.S. has engineered a regime change as it wished in Iraq, it might be useful to review events that led up to the U.S. invasion and look for hints of where events in the Middle East might lead in the future.

The origins of the Iraqi invasion can be traced to the oil crisis of the 1970s, when a group of foreign policy strategists in Washington began to dream of U.S. world hegemony through control of the Middle East and its oil.

In 1975, Harper's magazine published an article headlined "Seizing Arab Oil." James Akins, ambassador to Saudi Arabia at the time, said the article described "how we could solve all our economic and political problems by taking over the Arab oil fields (and) bringing in Texans and Oklahomans to operate them." Akins took issue publicly with the idea, and he was fired later that year.

The U.S. continued to seek a larger role in the Middle East, and the 1991 Gulf War opened the door. After the conflict, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states no longer opposed a direct U.S. military presence in the region.

1997 saw the founding of the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), which counted Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney and Paul Wolfowitz among its members.

The Gulf War had left Saddam Hussein in power in Iraq, and some in the PNAC felt he posed a serious threat. In 1998 the group sent open letters to President Clinton and to GOP congressional leaders calling for "the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime from power," by force if necessary.

The Iraq invasion this year and the widely unchecked looting that followed left little doubt as to the United States' priority. Nearly every public building in Baghdad was ransacked or destroyed save the oil ministry, which enjoyed round-the-clock protection by U.S. troops.

Neoconservative strategists such as Robert Kagan see the U.S. in Iraq for the long haul. "When we have economic problems, it's been caused by disruptions in our oil supply," he told the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, "If we have a force in Iraq, there will be no disruption in oil supplies."

"Controlling Iraq is about oil as power, rather than oil

as fuel," says Michael Klare, professor of peace and world security studies at Hampshire College. He told Mother Jones magazine that "[c]ontrol over the Persian Gulf translates into control over Europe, Japan, and China. It's having our hand on the spigot."

R. Gerald Bailey, who headed Exxon's Middle East operations until 1997, says oil companies felt caught in the middle. Executives were fearful that a war in Iraq might turn Arab states in the region against the U.S. and Western oil companies, but they also wanted their share if the oil was divided up.

David Long, a former U.S. diplomat in Saudi Arabia, adds, "It's greed versus fear."

That fear might be well founded. Just days after Saddam Hussein was toppled from power, millions of Muslims demonstrated in Iraq's cities to protest the presence of U.S. troops.

The Bush administration has promised to rebuild Iraq, help install a representative government and withdraw military forces as soon as possible. Secretary of State Colin Powell says there is no list of other countries to be targeted for invasion by the U.S.

On the other hand, Washington neoconservative Daniel Pipes co-authored a study three years ago that was critical of Syria, using language reminiscent of the run-up to the recent Iraq invasion.

The study, "Ending Syria's Occupation of Lebanon: The U.S. Role," called for using military force to disarm Syria of weapons of mass destruction and to end its military presence in Lebanon. Pipes has just been nominated by President Bush to the U.S. Institute of Peace.

Conservatives first proposed 30 years ago that the U.S. invade the Middle East to seize control of its oil. This year the U.S. invaded Iraq. With respect to Syria, are we now at three years and counting?



Middle East: A road map to peace?

Following the end of hostilities in Iraq, the U.S. and its "Quartet" partners – Russia, the UN and the European Union – prepared to release a proposed "road map" to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The road to peace thus far has been littered with failures: Oslo, Mitchell, Tenet. Palestinian terrorists target both Israeli soldiers and civilians. Meanwhile, Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) daily visit death and destruction upon Palestinians.

The human rights situation in the occupied territories recently attracted greater attention in the U.S. with the death of Rachel Corrie. The 23-year-old U.S. peace activist was killed March 16 in Rafah, the Gaza Strip, by an Israeli bulldozer attempting to demolish a Palestinian home.

Israeli forces reportedly demolish 15 homes in the occupied territories every day. Soldiers and settlers injure more than 25 Palestinians daily. Since September 2000 Israel has confiscated land in the West Bank and East Jerusalem equivalent to three times the size of Manhattan.

The Quartet's road map aims to create an independent and viable Palestinian state alongside Israel within three years after it has been accepted by both sides. An initial step has already been taken with the naming of Mahmoud Abbas as the new Palestinian prime minister. However, the timeline might be overly ambitious. It will require a truly "willing coalition" including both Israelis and Palestinians to bring the road map to fruition.

Monitoring the implementation of the agreement could become a major issue. Israel hopes to deny Russia, the UN and the European Union a major role in judging compliance.

The Quartet had agreed that its members should do the monitoring but agreed, in view of Israeli reservations, to a U.S.-led monitoring mechanism. Diplomats say the current plan calls for a Jerusalem-based monitoring committee to be headed by a U.S. citizen who would report to the Quartet.

The genesis of the road map was a speech by President Bush last June in which he called for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The following details of the plan are based on a Dec. 20, 2002, draft.

In the first phase of the road map, the first six months, Palestinians would declare an unequivocal end to violence

and terrorism and reiterate Israel's right to exist in peace and security. They would also produce a draft constitution for Palestinian statehood and hold multi-party elections. Other Arab states would cut off funding for groups involved in violence and terrorism.

Israel would lift curfews and closures and would suspend deportations, attacks on civilians and demolition of Palestinian homes. Israel would also dismantle settlement outposts erected since March 2001 and freeze all settlement activity. The IDF would withdraw from areas it has occupied since Sept. 28, 2000, and Palestinian forces would be redeployed there.

In the second phase, also six months, the Quartet would convene an international conference to facilitate the creation of an independent, democratic and viable Palestinian state with provisional borders. The Quartet would also promote international recognition of a Palestinian state, including possible UN membership. Other emphases would include meeting continued security obligations and finalizing the new Palestinian constitution.

The third phase, of two years' duration, would include a second international conference convened by the Quartet. The meeting would launch a process toward final resolution of issues including borders, Jerusalem, refugees and settlements. Arab states would move toward normal relations with Israel in the context of a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace.

While the road map addresses many political concerns, Rachel Corrie's mother, Cindy, went to the heart of the conflict. After seeing photos of Israeli and Palestinian children who had died in the violence since September 2000, she declared: "I want the mothers of these children to know that I have looked at the beaming faces of each of their babies and that I know how much the world has lost with the passing of each one of them."

Cindy Corrie's depth of compassion will be essential to any lasting peace accord, no matter how much "regime change" is achieved on both sides. It is difficult to measure compassion – or even to define it – but the world will recognize it when it sees it. We'll be watching.