



Agent Orange Twisted Her Limbs: The US Is Abandoning a Vow to Help

Fifty years after the Vietnam War ended, President Trump’s gutting of foreign aid has halted American efforts to address a toxic legacy and build a strategic partnership.



By [Damien Cave](#) | Feb. 17, 2025

Damien Cave reported from Dong Nai Province, where the U.S. military sprayed nearly 1.8 million gallons of Agent Orange during the Vietnam War.

Nearly 40 years after she was born with a malformed spine and misshapen limbs — most likely because her father was exposed to Agent Orange, the toxic chemical that the American military used during the Vietnam War — Nguyen Thi Ngoc Diem finally got some help from the United States.

A project funded by U.S.A.I.D. gave her graphic design training in 2022 and helped her land a job. Even when the company closed a few months ago, she stayed hopeful: The same program for Agent Orange victims was due to deliver a new computer, or a small loan.

I was the first to tell her that the support may never come; that President Trump had frozen U.S.A.I.D. funding and planned to fire nearly everyone associated with the humanitarian agency. “It makes no sense,” Ms. Diem told me, her tiny body curled into a wheelchair, below a crucifix on the wall. “Agent Orange came from the U.S. — it was used here, and that makes us victims,” she said. “A little support for people like us means a lot, but at the same time, it’s the U.S.’s responsibility.”



Ms. Diem had been expecting a small U.S. loan to help her buy a more modern computer for her graphic design work. Credit...Linh Pham for The New York Times



before the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War's end, with Ms. Diem uses a computer from 2011. It often freezes and shuts down unexpectedly. Credit...Linh Pham for The New York Times

As Mr. Trump and Elon Musk gut U.S.A.I.D., this can now be added to the list of effects: Two months ceremonies already planned, they have demolished the main American outlet for making amends, shaking the foundation of a partnership meant to be a bulwark against China. As many as three million Vietnamese have been affected by Agent Orange, including more than 150,000 children born with serious developmental problems.

Addressing the painful legacy of the chemical's wartime use as a defoliant, along with other issues tied to American military involvement in Vietnam, has offered the U.S. a chance to fuse past and present, soft power and hard power, in the service of courting a rising regional power.

That's now halted. Bulldozers that were cleaning up contamination at a former American air base in southern Vietnam — which both countries might eventually want to use — have gone silent. Around 1,000 mine-removal workers in central Vietnam have been sent home.

And with the suspension of aid for Agent Orange victims, along with efforts to find and identify Vietnam's missing war dead, Mr. Trump has essentially stalled 30 years of progress in bringing together former enemies, including two militaries still feeling out whether to trust one another.

While Vietnam's leaders have tread carefully with the Trump administration, hoping to avoid its punitive tariffs, they have lamented the loss of war legacy programs. They have long viewed the work as a prerequisite for almost everything else.

American officials who spent a lifetime building bilateral bonds are especially furious, signing open letters of complaint and condemning what they see as a plainly misguided move.

“One thing I know about the Vietnamese is that they want to know they can depend on us; that we won’t lose interest and walk away,” said Tim Rieser, a former foreign policy aide to Senator Patrick J. Leahy, a Vermont Democrat who led legislative efforts on war legacy issues before retiring in 2023. “And that’s what the Trump administration is doing.”

American military commanders see Vietnam, with its strategic location, as vital for maintaining stability in Asia, especially as China has become more aggressive around the shipping lanes and islands off the Vietnamese coast.

U.S. Navy warships have made several port visits to Vietnam since 2018. More are expected. And in a sign of Pentagon support for aid as a tool of alliance-building, half of the funding that U.S.A.I.D. manages for Agent Orange cleanup comes from the Defense Department.



U.S. Air Force planes spraying Agent Orange over southern Vietnam in 1966. Credit...Associated Press

Perhaps some of that will survive. According to the official account of a call on Feb. 7 between Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and Vietnam’s defense minister, Gen. Phan Van Giang, Mr. Hegseth “underscored the department’s support for ongoing efforts to collaborate on legacy of war issues.” A federal judge on Thursday ordered the Trump administration to temporarily lift the U.S.A.I.D. funding freeze, setting a Tuesday deadline for evidence of compliance.

But as of Monday in Vietnam, the work stoppage was still in effect. Even if funding returns, in a year meant to mark recovery from the darkness of a cruel war, fundamental damage has already been done in ways that feel — for partners and victims in both countries — like a knife shoved into old wounds.

From Enemies to Partners

Combat veterans were the original reconcilers. At first, they partnered up at the squad level, to rid battlegrounds of unexploded ordnance. But once Washington and Hanoi got on board, bigger problems

were tackled, starting with Da Nang Airport, a former American military base near the old dividing line between North and South Vietnam.

It had been a centerpiece of the campaign to clear vegetation with Agent Orange, named for the colored stripe on its barrels and notorious for containing 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin — one of the most noxious substances ever created. At the start, no one knew if the airport's poisoned land could be made safe. The projected cost of remediation tripled. But after seven years and more than \$115 million in U.S. assistance, it was clean. So clean that Mr. Trump landed there with Air Force One in 2018.

Bien Hoa air base, about 20 miles outside Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon, is a tougher challenge: a 10-year, \$450 million project involving the treatment of enough contaminated earth to fill 200 Olympic-sized swimming pools. The United States has contributed more than \$160 million so far, out of a pledge of \$300 million under U.S.A.I.D. management.



Water at the edge of Bien Hoa air base, where the United States has contributed more than \$160 million toward Agent Orange cleanup. Credit...Linh Pham for The New York Times



Dong Nai was sprayed with Agent Orange more than any other province in Vietnam during the war. Credit...Linh Pham for The New York Times

Tetra Tech, an American engineering firm hired by U.S.A.I.D. for part of the project, did not respond to emails asking about its status.

When I visited the busy neighborhood around the base last week, a Vietnamese military officer confirmed that the cleanup had been halted, creating anxiety in the city. Many of the homes nearby had been inside the base's perimeter, until its footprint was condensed. Dinh Thi Lan, 56, told me that in 1991, she was one of the first to move onto a street that abutted the base and a contaminated lake. During seasonal floods, she said, fish would sometimes flop out. "I ate the fish," she said. "I'm worried."

Behind her, in a back room, I could see a photo of a bright-eyed man with thick hair, above candles on a dark wood table. "My husband," she told me. "He died of stomach cancer in 2009. He was 39."

Searching for Impact

During the war, Dong Nai Province, with Bien Hoa at its southeastern edge, became a logistics hub for North Vietnamese soldiers as they prepared to take Saigon. Before that, the U.S. military had tried to strip the verdant landscape of food and cover. Pilots usually flew 150 feet from the ground. They sprayed 56 percent of Dong Nai with nearly 1.8 million gallons of Agent Orange — more than in any other province in Vietnam.



A Vietnamese officer at the Bien Hoa air base said cleanup work had been halted. Credit...Linh Pham for The New York Times



Fishing is banned at some lakes in Bien Hoa. Credit...Linh Pham for The New York Times

Truong Thi Nguyet, 75, joined the guerrilla ranks in Dong Nai at 16. After the war, she founded one of Vietnam's first rehabilitation centers for people with disabilities caused by Agent Orange, which the United States banned in 1971.

In remote villages, she found dozens of boys and girls with missing or malformed limbs, deafness, cerebral palsy, cognitive impairment and sometimes all of the above. One morning, she discovered a poor family so overwhelmed that they had put their severely disabled daughter in a cage outside. "I never thought I would tell anyone this story," Ms. Nguyet said when I visited her home in Dinh Quan township. "It was so painful, and I was so angry."

"I tried to raise some money and convince the family to build a small room in the house," she added. "After a while, with some financial support, they did."

Most of the funding for the rehab center comes from the Vietnamese government. But a sign over the door declares that U.S.A.I.D. provided equipment in 2020: a few desks and a metal bed; a playroom with a climbing wall and a pool of candy-colored plastic balls.

Since 1991, according to the State Department, the U.S. government has contributed about \$155 million to improve the lives of people with disabilities in areas affected by Agent Orange and leftover explosives. The U.S.A.I.D. program that benefited Ms. Diem, the graphic designer, is limited in scope. Last year, just 45 Agent Orange victims in Dong Nai (out of 9,000) received no-interest loans of a little under \$800. Some bought scooters, and others invested in goats, said Nguyen Van Thinh, 47, the leader of a club that has 260 members with disabilities.



Ms. Diem lives with her parents. Her father was exposed to Agent Orange during the war. Credit...Linh Pham for The New York Times

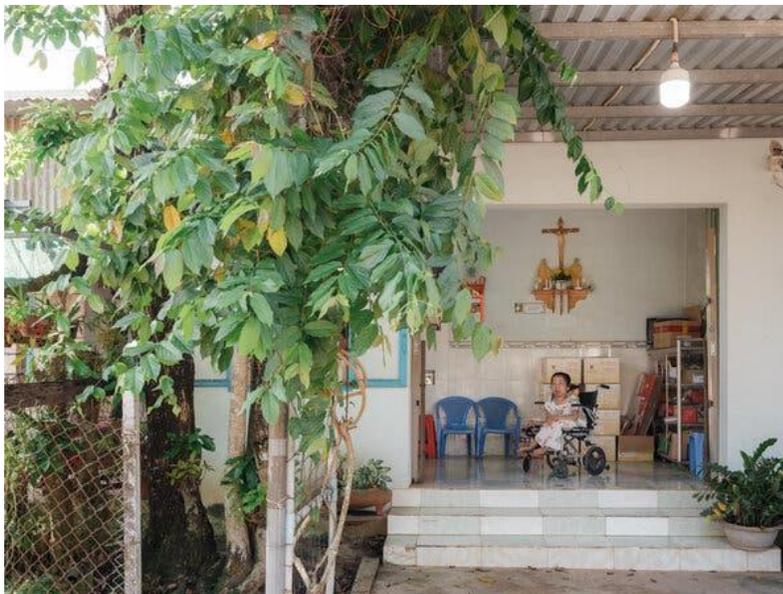


Ms. Diem reading a book that featured her experience as a college student. Credit...Linh Pham for The New York Times

Ms. Diem was among 11 women who were approved for smaller loans this year under a “social inclusion” program. Her commitment and grit are undeniable. After high school, she went to college away from home, persuading friends and strangers to carry her to class or the bathroom. She earned a degree in information technology.

Now, all she wants is a computer for doing her design work — support she was promised by the United States, which contaminated her country and gnarled her body.

“I want to feel connected with the world,” she told me. “I want to be less of a burden.”



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