

## **VIETNAMESE FAMILIES STILL BATTLING THE AFTERMATH OF AGENT ORANGE**

You can't help but notice it, Vietnam is changing. Pictures of smart hotels in Hanoi, glorious beaches in Nha Trang, the excitement of the Reunification Express, five-star voyages along the Mekong and the splendour of Halong Bay, tell us that Vietnam is an exciting, modern country full of happy friendly people.

But that is only half the story. If you look deeper into the parts of Vietnam where the tourist rarely travels, you find a people and a country which cannot leave its past traumas behind.

Last year Reuters photographer Damir Sagolj was dispatched to Vietnam to try and record the continuing effects of the tragedy of Agent Orange. His very moving article and some of the photographs were published in the Independent in April 2017. He writes:

*"I can't say where and when I heard it but I remember the advice well: no matter how many times the story has been done and how many people have done it, do it as if you are the first and only one to witness it. I listened to this advice so many times in the past and I listened to it now.*

*Such assignments have rules, among the most important being the longer you spend in the unknown, the more chance you have of getting strong pictures. So a Vietnamese colleague and I set off to travel around Vietnam, a country stretching more than 1,500 kilometres from north to south, with a great many people still affected by Agent Orange.*

*The Vietnam Association of Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin (VAVA) told Reuters that more than 4.8 million people in Vietnam have been exposed to the herbicide and over 3 million of them have been suffering from deadly diseases.*

*But soon after I started taking*

*pictures and talking to victims and their relatives, I realised I would need to think again about how to do this story. My immediate and natural reaction was to get closer, almost into the face of a victim, to show what has happened to human bodies. A forensic photography approach, almost.*

*In a hospice outside Hanoi, after a few strong portraits of a kid born with no eyes and other victims whose bodies are horribly twisted, my original plan felt wrong. The faces and eyes in the pictures hurt; the focus is there but I may be missing things around, possibly even the story itself.*

*I wanted to put it all in the context of today's Vietnam, 42 years on. To see victims of the second and third generations, where and how they live. To learn why children and grandchildren of people affected are still being born with*

*disabilities, to find out if people know about the dangers, and if so when did they found out. And to take pictures of all that.*

*As we got closer to the former front lines travelling from the north, the number of cases increased. We kept in touch with VAVA, the main association helping victims, and they gave us much needed information, including the number of victims and where they live.*

*Throughout the assignment, VAVA and other local officials together with family members confirmed that the health conditions of people we met and photographed are linked to Agent Orange as their parents or grandparents were exposed to it.*

*In yet another village, Le Van Dan, an ex South Vietnamese soldier, wearing a worn-out military jacket of the communists, his former enemy force, told*



*Nguyen Thi Van Long (R) and her best friend Dinh Thi Huong, who is deaf and mute, spend time together at a hospice for Agent Orange victims near Hanoi (Reuters)*

me how he was sprayed directly from U.S. planes not far from his home today. As the tough man spoke through broken teeth, two of his grandsons in a room behind the kitchen were given milk provided by a government aid agency. Both kids were born severely disabled, doctors say because of Agent Orange.

In a small village in Thai Binh province, in a cold room empty of any furniture, Doan Thi Hong Gam shrank under a light blue blanket. The room's dirty walls suggest anger and some sort of struggle. She's been kept in isolation since the age of sixteen because of her aggressiveness and severe mental problems. She is 38 now.

I took pictures of the poor woman for about 15 minutes. They were possibly the strongest frames I have taken in a long time. Her father, a former soldier lying in the bed in a room next to hers, also very sick, was exposed to Agent Orange during the war.

Then another village and another picture. On a hill above his home, former soldier Do Duc Diu showed me the cemetery he built for his twelve children, who all died soon after being born disabled. There are a few extra plots next to the existing graves for where his daughters, who are still alive but very sick, will be buried.

The man was also a North Vietnamese soldier exposed to the toxic defoliant. For more than twenty years he and his wife were trying to have a healthy child. One by one their babies were dying and they thought it was a curse or bad luck, so they prayed and visited spiritual leaders but that didn't help.

They found out about Agent Orange only after their fifteenth child was born, also sick. I took a picture of the youngest daughter. It was not an easy thing to do. Village after village, strong pictures and even stronger stories emerge. My camera stayed at a distance. I shot through mosquito nets and against the light, I shot details and reflections. We took many notes trying not to miss any important details needed to build an accurate picture. Then we drove further south.

Back in Danang, next to its international airport, we visited a young couple who have lived and worked there since late 1990s. When they first moved there the

man used to go fishing, collecting snails and vegetables to bring home to eat.

The family was poor and all food was welcomed. What he didn't know was that Agent Orange, which used to be stored nearby, had contaminated the waters and everything around the lake situated next to the airstrip.

His daughter was born sick in 2000 and died aged seven. Their son was born in 2008, also sick with the same symptoms as his late sister. I took pictures and then we drove the family to the hospital for the boy's blood transfusion. The blind and very sick boy held my finger and later blew a kiss into the emptiness. I saw it from afar as I walked away.

The United States stopped spraying Agent Orange in 1971 and the war ended in 1975. Twenty years later, some people from villages and cities didn't know all about it. More than 40 years later, today, children and their parents still suffer and a large part of the story remains untold. Agent Orange is one big tragedy made of many small tragedies, all man-made.

There is not much I can do about it with my pictures except to retell the story,

despite all the raised eyebrows. The pictures I took are not about the before and after, they are all about now. As for how poorly we read history and stories from the past, I'm afraid that is about our future, too."

The complete article, along with Damir Sagolj's remarkable photographs entitled 'VIETNAMESE FAMILIES STILL BATTLING THE AFTERMATH OF AGENT ORANGE' can be found at the Independent Website <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/agent-orange-vietnam-war-us-damir-sagolj-a7664491.html> REUTERS/Damir Sagolj

MSAVLC is one of the few UK charities which, for many years, has supported Agent Orange victims through VAVA (the Vietnam Association for Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin), Hoa Binh Peace Village in Ho Chi Minh City, and Thanh Xuan Peace Village in Hanoi.

Your donations will ensure that we are able to continue that support.

Peter Lidgard –Editor



Former soldier Do Duc Diu prays at the cemetery where twelve of his children are buried. Twelve of his fifteen children died from illnesses that the family and their doctors link to Do Duc Diu's exposure to Agent Orange. Do Duc Diu served as a North Vietnamese soldier in the early 70s in areas that were heavily contaminated by Agent Orange. He said that if he had known about the possible effects of Agent Orange he would not have had children. (Reuters)

## THE BULLETIN - DATA PROTECTION

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that you share with us, we will keep it safe, and we will not share it with third parties.

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# DISABLED SERVICES IN CAMBODIA

MSAVLC has been proud to fund the Paraplegic and Quadriplegic Rehabilitation (PQR) Project which is run by Disability Development Services Program in Pursat, for the last nine years. Disability Development Services Program (DDSP) is the only organization which directly helps disabled people in the whole of Pursat Province, an area the size of Cornwall, Devon and Dorset combined. However, the counties of South-West England bear few other similarities with the Province of Pursat; it is heavily forested, many of its people are very poor, living off the land in scattered villages, and there is only about 80 km of tarmac road in the whole province!

The most recent PRQ project in Pursat began in July 2018 and staff at DDSP recently sent their first six-month report to MSAVLC's Trustees. Most of the following comes from that report.

The PQR Project Goal is to 'Improve the quality of life for paraplegics and quadriplegics' in all districts of Pursat Province, through access to health, rehabilitation, livelihood services and social inclusion. At present they are directly supporting 110 clients, 41 female and 69 male.

DDSP staff believe that it is important to co-ordinate their efforts with other providers, and they cooperate closely with local and national Government Departments and Non-Government Organisations (NGOs). Strong support is received from Pursat Province's Department of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation, and from the Department of Education, Youth and Sport. Many clients are directed to DDSP from the National Spinal Cord Injury Centre in Battambang, and the International Red Cross Physical Rehabilitation Centre, following traffic, farming or forestry accidents, injuries caused by unexploded ordinance, particularly land-



mines, or falling from coconut trees. Before they were injured these people were living active productive lives in their community and when they return home from the injury centre DDSP is often called in to support them.

DDSP project healthcare professionals conduct regular home visits to ensure that the issues and challenges faced by their clients can be dealt with. Many new clients suffer from stress, both psychological and economic, as well as having physical challenges requiring physiotherapy, counselling and clinical intervention. Wheelchairs and mobility aids are often provided as well as economic help in the form of income-generating schemes, to help clients support themselves and their families. DDSP provides support by regularly sending their clinicians out on motorbikes, along the sometimes dusty, sometimes muddy, roads and tracks to the far-flung corners of the province where their clients live. The clinicians may travel for four or five hours from Pursat Town to reach a client, and on occasions they stop overnight in a guest house, before moving on to the next distant client. They must be skilled to provide clinical and physiotherapy support, give advice on

rehabilitation, health, hygiene and nutrition, and give counselling and psychological support to newly disabled people and their families.

In addition DDSP provides practical supplies in the form of wheelchairs and walking aids, ceramic water filters, blankets, mosquito nets, mattresses, sarongs, and household materials. Each family is also assessed by DDSP officers, and where necessary wells and disabled latrines are constructed.

The latest report states that over the first six-month period:

Three disabled people have been referred to hospital or to the rehabilitation centre in Battambang, Ten disabled people have been provided with wheelchairs, Spare parts have been supplied and fitted to four wheelchairs, Five wheelchairs have been repaired, Five people have been given a pair of crutches or a walking frame, Eight disabled people have been given a mattress, Twenty three ceramic water filters have been provided, Two disabled latrines have been constructed, and Nine of the poorest families living with disabled people have been given house-repair grants.

Peer-to-peer counselling is another vital service provided, and DDSP has organized three sessions in Pursat City, in Bakan and Kandeang Districts.



A total of 40 disabled people and key workers were able to meet together, to share problems and difficulties, and help and support each other. Involvement in such activities has given the disabled people confidence to join in other community activities and reduced the incidences of discrimination.

No matter what the cause of their disability, in many instances when someone suffers a spinal cord injury, they will lose their livelihoods and the whole family will suffer a significant loss of income. In many cases DDSP is able to step in and provide a revolving fund to improve family income.

Over the six-month period of the report, three families have been provided business start-up loans and established a grocery store, a vegetable shop and a seed merchants. Ongoing income-generation activities have also been maintained for 14 families, and four families have received calves from the 'cow bank'.

The Trustees are most grateful to DDSP's Director, Pheng Samnang, for overseeing the project and for the production of another excellent progress report. We are also grateful to the PRQ Project Co-ordinator Hun Chandoeun, and Senior Physiotherapist Tep Buntha for running this essential project.

## DDSP CASE STUDY: Mat Sosh

Mat Sosh, a young, single, paraplegic man, is 36 years old. He lives with his parents in Roleab village, close to Pursat City.

Sosh and his family are very poor, he has 9 brothers and sisters. Sosh became a paraplegic in 2006, following an accident in the mountains of Kravang District, while he was tree cutting.

Sosh faced many challenges before he was supported by DDSP; he was not able to get out of bed, he did not have a wheelchair. He had no health and hygiene materials, and he was unable to care for his family. Family members cared for him but he became depressed and suffered discrimination from his community because of his disability.

Luckily for him, Sosh became a DDSP client in March 2008. The project staff provided counselling for both him and his family, treated him with physiotherapy, trained him to stand with a standing frame, cured his bed sores and provided health and hygiene materials. In order to improve the daily income, DDSP provided him with start-up funds for a wood-selling business.

Now, his business runs very well and his life has completely changed. His physical and mental health have improved immeasurably. He looks healthy, strong and confident. His neighbours appreciate his struggle and success and he is once again a valued member of the community.

"I am back now: my family value and care for me now. I have new hope in my life again because of DDSP. I wish DDSP and their donors strength and success to support other vulnerable people in Pursat province", he said.



*Mat Sosh with DDSP physiotherapist Tep Buntha.*

## MEDICAL AND SCIENTIFIC AID FOR VIETNAM, LAOS AND CAMBODIA

### ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The charity's Annual General Meeting will be held at St Mark's Methodist Church Hall, Gloucester Road, CHELTENHAM GL51 8PX. (Two minutes walk from Cheltenham Spa Station) on Saturday 11th May at 2.00 pm. Refreshments will be available.

### NEWS FROM 'DAUGHTERS OF CAMBODIA'

The Trustees were pleased to receive recently, the Spring Newsletter from Daughters of Cambodia. A detailed update will appear in the next Bulletin.