

Priest makes a difference amid Agent Orange fallout



Vietnam sanctuary for Agent Orange child victims. Ho Chi Minh City Vietnam.

Many of the children at Father Tu's care homes are severely disabled
When Bui Anh The grinds his teeth, cries and flexes his body, a nun holds him close and pats him on the shoulder. "I love you very much," she says.

The seven-year-old then stops crying and smiles, showing his four teeth.

Lying beside Bui, who was born with cerebral palsy, are two other disabled boys who themselves begin to cry.

One of them vomits up his latest meal while the other hits his head with his hands and grinds his teeth, saliva flowing from his mouth, when two nurses hold them up and begin to wash them down.

They are among 70 children with Down's syndrome, nervous disorders, physical deformities and other physical and mental disorders cared for by 12 nuns and 10 nurses at the church-run Thien Phuoc Center on the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City.

Although Father Pierre Phan Khac Tu, the man who started the center in 2001, says he cannot afford tests to determine the precise effects of dioxin, better known as Agent Orange, in these cases, all of these children come from areas in the south that the American military sprayed heavily with the poison during the Vietnam War.

“We want to look after them as a way to reduce subsequent health problems after the Vietnam War,” said Fr. Tu.

According to records in Hanoi, during the decade that followed 1961, the US sprayed some 80 million liters of the toxic defoliant over 30,000 square-miles of jungle in the south of Vietnam in a bid to strip Vietcong guerillas of tree cover.

Since then an estimated 4.8 million Vietnamese have been exposed to Agent Orange, which pollutes riverbeds and soil for generations. The US only started an official joint clean-up operation with the Vietnamese around Danang Airport – the area where it was stored and handled during the conflict – on August 9.

On August 18, Phu Cat airbase in Binh Dinh province became the first heavily affected area to be officially cleaned up after thousands of cubic feet of contaminated soil and sediment was confined to a landfill site in a two-year operation.

“We are both moving earth and taking the first steps to bury the legacies of our past,” said United States Ambassador to Vietnam David B. Shear. “I look forward to even more successes to follow.”

For Father Tu, the horrific legacy of Agent Orange is more than one person can handle, but he is trying.

He runs another home giving food and accommodation to a further 63 children with physical deformities and is building a third children’s home for 100 more.

Sister Marie Le Thi Lan says that, given most parents leave their children at the centers and never return, often due to a lack of money, all the children really need is love and care.

“I wish my parents would take me home,” says 13-year-old Tran Thi Loc, looking up at the ceiling.

Weighing just 10 kilograms and with brittle bones and deformed limbs, her parents live far to the north in Nghe An province.

“She doesn’t know that she is an orphan and that ‘back home’ means to die,” says the nun, wiping tears from her eyes. “When a child dies, we tell the others that the child has ‘gone home’ so that they have less fear.”