

Press Release

Zurich, 24 April 2015

International Health and Training Programme Social and Medical Care in Vietnam and Laos:

Coping with Agent Orange Contamination 40 Years after the Vietnam War

During the Vietnam War, more than 72 million liters of the chemical defoliant Agent Orange were sprayed across the fields and forests of Vietnam as well as unknown quantities of it in rural areas in Laos and Cambodia. The people were directly exposed to the defoliant operations. Furthermore, additional contamination was most likely caused over the past 30 years through contact with former military bases (hot spots). According to investigations by the Vietnamese government and the study of Hatfield Consultants, Canada, hot spots are areas where the soil has very high TCDD contamination (tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin). Hot spots are found near former military bases where Agent Orange was transported, loaded onto planes and spilled. In the process, the soil was contaminated by the hazardous chemical in quantities that significantly exceeded those sprayed from the air. Dioxin also got into the food chain, especially via fish and other animals, and consequently into the human inhabitants.

Green Cross Switzerland supports children and young people in Vietnam who indirectly become war victims due to the herbicide Agent Orange sprayed during the Vietnam War and are suffering disabilities as a result. According to estimates, approx. 3,500 children are born each year whose physical disability is the result of the defoliant Agent Orange during the Vietnam War. The most toxic and difficult to degrade by-product of Agent Orange is dioxin, which is associated with an increasing number of diseases today. These include various cancers, birth defects such as spina bifida and other deformities as well as damages to the nervous, immune and endocrine systems.

Within the context of the International Social and Medical Care Programme, Green Cross Switzerland finances the treatment and care of children and young adults with artificial limbs (replacement of limbs) and orthopedic devices (support of limbs).

The profession of orthopedic technician was unknown in Vietnam, which was the reason why the education and training site Vietcot in Hanoi was created in 1997 under the direction and collaboration of the orthopedic technician specialists of the German society for technical cooperation GTZ (renamed GIZ in 2011). Further management of the project was taken over by Vietcot/ULSA, University of Labour and Social Affairs, in 2006. The education and training site Vietcot is recognized as an official part of the educational system in the country today. Students undergo a three-year study program in orthopedic technology in Vietcot, which is composed of theoretical lessons and practical work. Green Cross has been providing orthopedic treatment to children in Vietnam since 1998 and supports the education and training of orthopedic specialists with scholarships.

Disability and Integration Programme as help to self-help

The children are selected based on the poverty principle, the region and the disability, which resulted from Agent Orange contamination or its effects. As a preparatory measure for later orthopedic technical treatment, operations and subsequent training at a gait school are often required.

The young adults are the "forgotten ones". Today 18-45 years old, these people were born during or after the Vietnam War and never received support. Due to the war and the disastrous situation afterward, the Vietnamese had to struggle to survive in daily life, and little time remained to help disabled children. Today, they hardly have any chance to be accepted

into a program of an aid organization due to their age. Thanks to targeted orthopedic treatment, the "forgotten" get a new chance in life.

It has been possible to provide more than 3,000 persons with artificial limbs or orthopedic devices since 1998. Students from Vietcot in their third year of studies provide the treatment in part, supervised by proven specialists. In the sense of sustainability, these two projects also include rehabilitation, follow-up treatments and—above all—regular adaptations of the orthopedic devices in accordance with the growth of the children. Especially small children require follow-up treatments until they are 15.

With the integration project launched in 2001, Green Cross Switzerland is confronting the problem of the marginalization of disabled people. Physically disabled adolescents receive a loan in the form of a pregnant cow. The loan can be repaid via the sale of calves and milk, and a modest income source can be secured in the long term. The project has demonstrated positive results in the 155 families participating until now. Small cow farms have already been created in part, and the social standing of the disabled adolescents and their families has increased considerably.

The project "early detection" is situated in the preventive area. It has the goal of improving early detection of physical disabilities by the inhabitants, because many disabilities can be treated successfully if detected at an early stage. The project also includes information as well as education and training courses for medical staff and for the relatives of disabled children, so that they detect when new orthopedic devices must be readapted on time. As a result, back injuries or other deformities can be avoided.

Recording hot spots in Laos, which are contaminated by Agent Orange (dioxin)

With the goal of reduced contamination due to Agent Orange (dioxin) in Sekong Province in Laos, Green Cross Switzerland started an initial pilot project in collaboration with the government of Laos and the environmental specialists from Hatfield Consultants, Canada, in 2008. It serves to work out adapted concepts and information for these regions and protect the inhabitants from dioxin contamination.

To evaluate the contamination, environmental specialists from Hatfield undertook very different analyses of the soil as well as of fish and waterfowl in suspected hot spot areas in Laos. In addition, many discussions were held with war veterans and the epidemiological data of the local inhabitants was recorded. The result of the analysis of the samples taken (Hatfield, 2005; Hiyoshi, 2008) points to the Javanese military airport in Sekong Province as a dangerous hot spot. Many of the approx. 100 families at Dak Triem live within close proximity and are subject to an elevated risk. The same areas also have the severe problem of land mines.

Protect the inhabitants from dioxin

The focal point of the activities of Green Cross in Laos and Cambodia is above all in the areas of health and welfare of children, adolescents and families. Corresponding knowledge is disseminated to other community members via training of the parents. The primary goal of the project is the sustainable improvement of the village communities' living conditions in the provinces affected by Agent Orange. These include:

- Education program in the communities for explaining the dangers from Agent Orange and teaching basic knowledge about health and hygiene
- Medical treatment and health problem prevention measures for affected children, adolescents and women. Operation of a field clinic for medical support of families with children is being set up in Laos.
- Provision of basic equipment such as water filters and sanitary facilities in the villages to ensure access to clean water
- Performance of additional soil analyses

Informing local authorities about the dangerous effects of Agent Orange is also a goal, so that hot spot areas are clearly marked for village inhabitants and cultivation of vegetables on contaminated soil is stopped.

To implement the projects in the International Social and Medical Care Programme, , Green Cross Switzerland works with ULSA/Vietcot (University of Labor and Social Affairs) in Vietnam; the partners in Laos are the Health Ministry and the Defense Ministry as well as WREA (Water Resources and Environment Administration) and the environmental specialists from Hatfield Consultants, Canada, and the partners in Cambodia are the non-governmental organization Wathnakpheap.

For further information, please contact Maria Vitagliano, Director of the International Social and Medical Care Programme, Green Cross Switzerland, at Tel. 079 799 09 62.