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Guest Column: War Legacies And The Expanding U.S.-Vietnam Partnership

Guest Column By Patrick Leahy:
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April 17, 2019

[Senator Leahy this week is heading an official bipartisan U.S. Senate delegation of nine senators to Vietnam and to the Korea DMZ, during the current Senate recess. On Wednesday Leahy and the delegation will take part in the official inauguration of a second Agent Orange remediation project in Vietnam. Leahy has led the congressional work in launching and funding the two remediation projects, which address one of the most difficult legacies of the Vietnam War. These Leahy-led projects have been key elements in helping to forge the strong new relationship between the United States and Vietnam.]

When I became a senator for Vermont in 1975, one of the first votes I cast was for a law to stop funding the war in Vietnam. That law passed by one vote.

Many of us know people who served in the war. Some lost their lives. Others were grievously wounded. Words cannot adequately describe the magnitude of the catastrophe of that war for the people of both countries. Forty-four years later, we still struggle in our country with the remnants of the divisions in our society caused by the war, as do the people of Vietnam.

My involvement with post-war Vietnam began in 1989, when former President George H. W. Bush and I talked about the need for reconciliation with Vietnam – something that many Americans, including veterans, were calling for.

President Bush agreed to use what was later named the Leahy War Victims Fund to provide prosthetics and wheelchairs to Vietnamese who were disabled from landmines and other unexploded bombs. That assistance, which continues today, has enabled thousands of Vietnamese to regain their mobility, and their dignity.

Of course, others had been working on the MIA issue even earlier. That work helped bring closure to hundreds of American families. It was possible thanks to the help of the Government of Vietnam, at a time when Vietnam was struggling to recover from the war's devastation.

For many years the United States has also helped locate and destroy the millions of landmines and other unexploded bombs that continue to maim and kill innocent Vietnamese. Fortunately, thanks to that effort, the number of casualties is far fewer today than it used to be. But more remains to be done.

Over the years I had many conversations with Vietnamese officials, before and after diplomatic relations were reestablished in 1995. No matter what the subject of those conversations was, the Vietnamese always brought up Agent Orange, and its effects on their people.

At the same time, American veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange and were suffering from cancers and other illnesses, were also seeking help from our government. In 1991 the Department of Veterans Affairs recognized those claims, but it wasn't until another 15 years later that we began to address this issue in Vietnam.

We started at the Da Nang Airport, a former U.S. military base where Agent Orange, contaminated with dioxin, had been stockpiled. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) deserves great credit for undertaking and completing such a complex, difficult, and ultimately successful project to decontaminate 100,000 cubic meters of soil and sediment.

The Vietnamese Ministry of Defense worked closely with USAID to overcome many obstacles to complete the project, and in doing so they helped advance relations between our two countries to a higher level. Like the MIA and UXO issues before it, Agent Orange evolved from a subject of anger and resentment, to one of cooperation and appreciation.

For four decades, the Da Nang Airport was a health hazard to thousands of people living nearby. A little over a year ago, the APEC Summit was held there. Soon after that, a U.S. aircraft carrier docked at Da Nang, and sailors visited an orphanage for children who may have inherited their disabilities from parents or grandparents who were exposed to Agent Orange.

None of this would have happened were it not for the perseverance and cooperation of our two governments.

Throughout this period, USAID also expanded health and disability programs to seven Vietnamese provinces. They provide medical, rehabilitation, infrastructure, and social assistance to severely disabled Vietnamese in areas that were heavily sprayed with Agent Orange or contaminated with dioxin.

On April 17th I will arrive in Vietnam for the third time, accompanied by 8 senators of both political parties. This time we will travel to the Bien Hoa Air Base near Ho Chi Minh City, which was the largest U.S. military base in Vietnam during the war.

Along with U.S. Embassy and Vietnamese officials, we will inaugurate the remediation project at Bien Hoa, the largest remaining hotspot of dioxin contamination. This will be one of the largest environmental remediation projects in the world.

At the same time, we will witness the signing of an agreement between the United States and Vietnam, spelling out a new 5-year commitment to support health and disabilities programs for persons with disabilities in provinces that were heavily sprayed with Agent Orange.

The benefits of this humanitarian cooperation have been far-reaching:

- It has reunited the remains of U.S. soldiers with their loved ones;
- It has enabled many people in Vietnam who lost their mobility to become mobile again;
- It has helped Vietnamese families and communities to care for the disabled;
- We are getting rid of the dioxin; and
- We have begun to help Vietnam identify the remains of Vietnamese MIAs.

Just as important, this cooperation has been the foundation of a growing partnership. While our two governments have disagreements on important issues, we share many interests: from increasing student exchanges, to expanding trade relations, to combating climate change.

Our partnership with the Ministry of Defense, and the active support and engagement of the U.S. Department of Defense and the U.S. Department of State in these humanitarian efforts, have opened up new opportunities for cooperation on regional security issues, today and in the future.

We cannot escape the fact that the war was a disaster for generations of Vietnamese and Americans. Each of us who lived through that period has our own memories, our own emotions, our own opinions.

For me, there can be no excusing the folly of that war, nor diminishing of the immense destruction and suffering that it caused.

But we can all be proud of the way our two countries have worked to overcome that tragic legacy. We have come a long way, and we have further to go.

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[Patrick Leahy (D) is Vermont's senior U.S. senator and is heading the official bipartisan delegation of nine senators that this week is visiting Vietnam and the DMZ in South Korea. He has led congressional work in launching and funding the Agent Orange remediation projects in Vietnam, as well as de-mining programs and help for landmine victims and other victims of war.]

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