

DECLARATION

On the long-term consequences of war in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam

“The past, far from disappearing or lying down and being quiet, has an embarrassing and persistent way of returning and haunting us, unless it has in fact been dealt with adequately.”

— Desmond Tutu, recipient of Nobel Peace Prize 1984

WARS DO NOT END when the bombs stop falling and the fighting stops. The devastation continues long after, in the land and in the minds and bodies of the people. Years have passed since the conclusion of the wars that for decades tormented Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam; but throughout the region, innocent victims are still suffering.

People continue to be maimed and killed by the millions of explosive devices left behind from the war. The victim is often a child who chances upon a landmine or unexploded bomb while playing with friends or walking to school; or it may be a farmer whose plow strikes a shell hidden in the earth. These human tragedies affect entire families and communities. During peacetime, there have been at least 50,000 deaths in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, plus countless injuries. The number continues to grow, month after month.

Intense and widespread U.S. bombing of rural areas, land-clearing with tractors, spraying of defoliants, and other war-related devastation laid waste to vast tracts of valuable fields and forests. Ecosystems were destroyed, leaving wastelands dominated by worthless grasses and weeds. Large areas cannot be farmed due to the persistent danger of landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO).

Other remnants of the war work their damage less visibly, but no less destructively. Over 72 million liters of defoliating chemicals were sprayed on the fields and forests of Vietnam, and an unknown amount on the countryside of Cambodia and Laos. The toxic by-products of their manufacture still remain in hazardous “hot spots”—the highly contaminated sites of accidents, spills, and military bases—causing serious risk to health in surrounding populated areas.

The most toxic and persistent of these unintended by-products is dioxin, which has been linked to a growing list of infirmities, including several forms of cancer, the birth defect

spina bifida, type 2 diabetes, and disorders of the nervous, immune and endocrine systems. Internationally recognized research also suggests possible links to several other birth defects and reproductive disorders.

Many children of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam who are afflicted by these consequences of war require lifelong care from families already burdened with poverty and, in many cases, with other war-related injuries and illnesses. There is a need for additional scientific research on the health effects of dioxin, especially research that can yield direct humanitarian benefits such as locating hot spots that qualify as hazardous by international standards and guidelines. Humanitarian assistance to victims, identified on the basis of criteria established by responsible national authorities, should be immediate and ongoing; it cannot await definitive scientific conclusions.

Much has been done by the peoples of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam to assist victims, reclaim the land, and rebuild villages, towns and infrastructure. In this they have been aided by numerous individuals and organizations from around the world. That aid must not diminish as new problems challenge the conscience of the world. Moreover, the resources thus far available, both locally and internationally, are far short of the need.

A full accounting, based on information available to the U.S. government from in-country surveys and records of both overt and covert military operations, must be provided to determine the scope and impact of the use of chemicals during the war.

The 27th International Conference of Red Cross and Red Crescent— responsible for maintaining and updating the Geneva Agreements on the Rules of War— concluded in 1999 that belligerent parties “should endeavor, wherever appropriate, to engage in post-conflict discussion with respect to aiding the victims of war”. It is long past time to apply this principle to the costly legacy of war in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.

The peoples and governments of those three countries have demonstrated a generous spirit towards former enemies and do not seek to perpetuate the hostility of war. But they do seek assistance. The world community, especially

the U.S. government along with those corporations and other countries that were directly or indirectly involved in the production and use of the weapons at issue, must respond to that appeal by addressing today the enduring consequences of the past in a spirit of restorative justice.

In the **name** of humanity and simple decency, we call on the United Nations and on all people of conscience and good will, personally and through the actions of their governments, to support a large-scale effort to address the present and continuing impact of war on the lives, livelihoods and environment of the peoples of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Ecosystems

Research: Undertake comprehensive surveys of areas seriously affected by the war in order to facilitate documentation for land-use planning and reforestation in wetland and inland ecosystems.

Rehabilitation: Improve the means of livelihood for local peoples in those areas to encourage development of sustainable ecosystems.

Capacity-building: Provide multidisciplinary training of technical specialists in habitat restoration and conservation of inland and coastal ecosystems.

Public Health

Assistance: Provide concrete assistance to victims, including medical care, surgery, rehabilitation, prosthetics, wheelchairs and other assistive devices, as well as social support to their families.

Education: Disseminate information about risks, and means of mitigation.

Containment and clearance: Identify toxic-waste hot spots and landmines/UXO sites. Help residents to overcome the psychological and economic difficulties of relocation. Contain hot spots, and contain or clear landmine/UXO sites.

Research: Investigate the effects of dioxin on public health in the context of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, including the character of disease, its prevention, and methods of therapy.

Economic & Social Development

Reconstruction: Create a large-scale, post-conflict environmental and social reconstruction program, integrated into ongoing national development strategies.

Integration: Bring the wider environmental consequences of war into international planning for economic and social development.

Ethics, Law, Policy

International standards: Apply established environmental standards contained in national laws and international treaties, including the Agreement on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs), that mandate immediate action. Many aspects of Agent Orange problems and landmine/UXO sites can be contained or cleaned up now, given adequate commitment and resources.

Useful precedents: Identify and apply precedents of funds established in many countries to deal with toxic-waste sites, for example U.S. legislation to clean up Formerly Used Defense Sites (FUDS).

Lessons: Prohibit use of herbicides as offensive or defensive weapons of war.

Public education: Promote worldwide education on the long-term consequences of war for the peoples and environment of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.