A WAR WHICH STILL GOES ON

Pham Van San had no intention of poisoning himself. The white stuff in the air quite simply drifted down onto him. Only gradually, over the course of weeks, months, years, did its after-effects become clear - so slowly it hardly fits in with the bustle of Vietnam's streets today. The journey from Hanoi to the provincial capital Bac Giang where the Pham family live takes only an hour, going past modern constructions of concrete and steel interspersed with temples and graveyards. In the maze of streets youths on Japanese motor scooters blast passers-by off the road with their horns. The Pham family occupy a tiny ground floor flat at the end of a narrow side street, next to a butcher's shop. Pham Van San, 58, is sitting on a low stool. He has a sallow face and a scarred soul. He finds it a strain to talk. After each sentence he pauses, draws a deep breath and tries in vain to get some air into his lungs. If it wasn't for this dreadful lassitude, he says, rubbing his bloodshot eyes. He prises himself off the stool, tops up the glasses with watery winter melon juice and lights joss sticks at the ancestral shrine.

He is glad to be alive, he says, coughing, but "I lost all my strength in the war". He is unable to do heavy work; even getting up from his mat costs him a lot of effort. He has just enough strength to vend pork in the market for short periods: after a couple of hours his wife takes over and he staggers back home to care for their physically handicapped son and mentally handicapped daughter. "They tell us it's all because of the white stuff the Americans sprayed down during the war." Pham Van San fought for just one year in the war against the Americans: it was 1974, in Danang, one of the "hotspots". Still today large areas of land there are contaminated with dioxin. One year was quite enough to destroy both his life and the lives of his children. After the war he got married. Two years later his wife gave birth to a stillborn child, a boy. In 1988 a daughter, Phuong, was born; she is mentally handicapped. It could hardly be coincidence: Pham Van San suspected something must be wrong with him. In the early nineties this became a certainty when doctors told him it definitely had something to do with a substance called Agent Orange. In 1994 their son Tan was born. Tan means "new one".

Tan lies on a bamboo platform staring into space with distorted pupils, his mouth just a crack in his face. His arms and legs are so thin, the skin is stretched tautly over his bones. His entire body is a festering disaster area wrapped in nappies. His torso is racked with incessant convulsions. Tan emits a groaning sound. His mother hurries to him with a bowl of rice gruel, clasps his head to her chest and dribbles food into him; this procedure takes more than an hour. After that Tan falls asleep.

This is just a normal day in the Pham household, full of hopelessness, crippling despair and profound grief. Thirty-six years after the end of the Vietnam war, some three million Vietnamese are still suffering from its consequences. Everywhere, in small villages in the Mekong delta, in the mountains of the north, in the central highlands, in cities like Hanoi, Saigon and Hue, countless old people, children and babies are condemned to a twilight existence in hospitals and care homes. It's like a hereditary curse blighting one generation after the other. Its carriers can be recognized by their deformations. These are the forgotten victims of one of the biggest war crimes of the last century: the victims of Agent Orange.

Sometimes the police call on us, says Pham Van San. For his daughter Phuong goes berserk from time to time, or runs round the neighbourhood screaming her head off. The name Phuong, by the way, means perfume. Drugs might help, but they are too expensive. Nobody in the neighbourhood is bothered; they know about the family's tragedy, they are sympathetic and help whenever they can. Sometimes someone will bring the family a sack of rice, someone else a packet of tea, some noodles or vegetables. Without help of this kind the Pham family could never

make ends meet. Today they made just 20,000 Vietnam Dang in the market: the equivalent of around eighty cents.

It was in November 1961 that US President John F. Kennedy gave the go-ahead for the highly secret "Operation Ranch Hand", aimed at defoliating the forests of Vietnam, where underground fighters of the Vietcong as well as the regular North Vietnam army were hiding and inflicting serious losses on the Americans. The plan also included the destruction of rice paddies in villages which supported the enemy with food. Although the Geneva Convention forbids the use of chemicals in warfare, contracts worth millions were awarded to American chemical firms such as Dow Chemicals, Hercules Inc., Occidental Chemical and Monsanto, and these firms supplied the army with hundreds of thousands of drums containing various types of herbicide. These drums were marked only with a band of colour, and thus their contents acquired from the American GIs the names by which they are still known today: Agent Pink, Agent Blue, Agent White - and Agent Orange, which contains the most poisonous of all the dioxins, 2,3,7,8-Tetrachlordibenzo-p-dioxin (TCDD).

Dioxin gets deposited in the soil, enters the food chain and causes genetic mutation. 2,3,7,8-Tetrachlordibenzo-p-dioxin is not only carcinogenic but also affects the reproductive process, giving rise to abnormalities in unborn children. It has got into the genes of an estimated three million further Vietnamese, who continue to suffer from the effects of Agent Orange - so far into the third generation. The first generation, of those who took part in the war, is gradually dying out, death often being caused by cancer and disorders of the skin and nervous system. Their descendants are turning into statistics where the fates of individuals are lost in the crowd. Very probably further generations will be affected. No end to the catastrophe is in sight.

Every town, every settlement has its quota of victims. Take for example Nguyen Anh Hai, 37, and his sister Nguyen Thi Hai, 34, who live in the commune of Dong Thang. Both suffer from Down's syndrome. Or the onetime Vietcong soldier Ha Van Xoam, 58, of Hoang Phuc commune, whose sons spit blood, are blind and mentally impaired. In Tan Quong village, 150 kilometres north of Hanoi, war veteran Le Van Nham, 63, watches as his grandson Song dies. The village doctors don't know what's wrong with him, but each day the eleven-year-old gets a bit weaker, to the point where he can no longer dress himself. "That's how it started with both of my sons," says the old man. Shortly after that they died.

Children with deformities are still being born: well over the average number of siamese twins; boys and girls with hydrocephalus, with fingers and toes fused together, with scaly skin which they shed in long strips like reptiles do. Babies without legs or without eyes, with exposed spine or bared cranium.

The worst cases end up in To Du hospital in Saigon, where stillborn foetuses are preserved in formaldehyde in a storeroom, and nurses care for the survivors with great patience. Others land up in the so-called Village of Peace on the edge of an industrial area in Hanoi. The home is hidden behind tamarind trees off an unsurfaced road, as if with the intention of shielding the inmates from curious eyes. The village was founded by a former American serviceman in Vietnam, who was himself suffering from the effects of Agent Orange and later died of cancer. The Village of Peace is a transit camp for wrecked bodies and locked-in souls. Hundreds of children are in it because their parents are either too ill or too poor to take care of them.

People who suffer from the effects of Agent Orange receive the equivalent of 25 Euros a month from the government, and that is all. Vietnam is a poor country. The American government and the chemical firms which manufactured the poisons refuse to provide any kind of reparation. A New York court gave a negative ruling on a joint claim by victims, arguing that there had never been any intention of poisoning human beings.

Nguyen Thanh Tung is not interested in the past. He loves the world even though he has never seen it. Tung is thirty years old and wears a white shirt and black pleated trousers. He lives in a housing colony in the suburbs of Hanoi - a dull setting for a senseless tragedy. In his world everyone is tuned into Beethoven, Haydn, Mozart and Tchaikovsky. Beethoven is his idol. When the composer lost his hearing in the final stages of his life, silence became his refuge. Tung smiles: since birth his own refuge has been darkness; for he is blind. His eyes are two milk white points which he fixes on the person he is talking to. He talks at length about emotions and willpower, about how notes and chords bring people together. He says he is fed up with being treated as a victim. People should realize what he is capable of instead of just looking at his deficiencies. Who needs sympathy when he has two diplomas from Hanoi's music academy to his credit, can play the piano and the Vietnamese lute like a maestro, has given concerts in Paris and Aix-la-Chapelle and visited Beethoven's house in Bonn? "Sometimes I fail to understand sighted people," says Tung; his hands flail around in the air as he talks, and his fingers execute pirouettes as if he was going to conduct an orchestra. "My life is wonderful!"

From another part of the flat comes a slight sound of rustling and groaning. Tung stops smiling.

He stands up, gropes his way through the tiny living room of this flat in the outskirts of Hanoi. Slowly he makes his way past shelves of books and CDs, showcases with vases of plastic flowers covered in dust, and the rusty rifle his grandfather used when fighting against the French. He edges past the piano till his leg strikes a bedstead. Tung bends down, and his fingers roam across the bamboo slats, feeling for his sister. He strokes her face, rubs her scalp.

There she lies, his elder sister with her contorted limbs, grinding her teeth. Her eyes are opened wide, saliva is dribbling from her mouth. "Her head is addled," says Tung. But that's not all. Thuy is mentally and physically handicapped, dumb and blind, and suffers from polio. For 33 years she has spent almost all her time lying on this hard bed, a woman who looks like an eight-year-old girl.

Tung's father, Nguyen Thanh Son, stands at the bedside next to his son and smiles silently down at his progeny. He is a small man with combed-back hair and a Ho Chi Minh beard. In 1965, at the age of eighteen, he entered the carnage which the Vietnamese call simply the American War. On the seventeenth parallel, the demarcation line dividing North from South Vietnam, Son's company would attack American patrols and South Vietnamese positions, then quickly hide in the impenetrable jungle. "Hundreds were killed in bloody battles," explains Son as he pours bitter tea into tiny cups and points to a tattoo which one of his mates pricked on his forearm while under fire. "Song Tran Nghia," it says: "Live with all your heart."

For the life of a Vietnamese soldier was a short one, a few weeks or months on average. First it was mortars, grenades and napalm which rained down on the jungle hideouts. "Then we saw planes with white clouds coming out of them," says Son.

The soldiers were handed out protective masks, like the ones nurses wear in hospitals, and covered their mouths and noses with them until the planes went away. That was the procedure their superior officers had drummed into them. They were given a warning that the Americans were using poisons. But nobody knew exactly what it was that was falling on them from the sky. True, the trees and bushes were losing all their leaves, but Son and his mates continued to fill their flasks with water from streams and bomb craters and to eat manioc, bark and forest plants with their rice soup. In 1975 Nguyen Thanh Son came back home to the capital city Hanoi. He wanted to get married and continue his studies -

the kind of things a man expects with all life ahead of him. At that time he had no notion that the war would never end for him, that he had taken it up in his genes.

The family was lucky to get a son with such intelligence, willpower and musical talent, says the father. Fate had not been so kind to numerous other families. That's why he wished the Americans would finally admit their guilt and pay some compensation to their victims, so as at least to mitigate their suffering a little. "We Vietnamese have always had to struggle for our rights - but we have always won in the end."

Tung listens to his father attentively. When the latter has finished his tale he stands up, goes to the piano and proceeds to play Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. For a brief moment the bamboo framework is transformed into a stage and the tiny living room becomes a concert hall; it is a solo performance for an old veteran and a handicapped girl who is now glugging and jerking contentedly.