

Premature deaths, family tragedies and herbicide...

By **DUONG DINH TUONG**

The birds singing on the tree remind Mrs. Dinh Thi Deng of the premature deaths of her two grandchildren in Hoc village, Ta Hoc commune, Mai Son district, Son La province

The sorrow of the living

Mrs. Deng loves her adopted son Leo Van Quy very much as she was infertile. She has taken good care of him since he was a little boy until now when he got married and has an 11 year old boy. However, the boy's two younger sisters had died prematurely by the time herbicide could be seen in every corner of the village.



Mrs. Deng telling about the premature deaths of her grandchildren

Like many other corn growers in the village, Mr. Quy and his pregnant wife sprayed herbicide on their corn field, while his mother was so happy and busy with preparation for welcoming their baby: buying new baby clothes and feeding chickens to get more nutrient food for the daughter-in-law.

She waited so long for her son and daughter-in-law coming back from the hospital to see the baby. However, she was too shocked and desperate to notice that there was no baby, except for baby's empty clothes. Their baby already died in the mother's womb! The second time her daughter-in-law also prematurely gave birth. The new born just cried weakly like a cat then died. Mrs. Deng cried for her dead grandchildren that she never ever had a chance to see them. The only thing she could do was to share the sorrow with her daughter-in-law and encourage her to overcome the loss and look into the brighter future.

Having wondered whether herbicide was the reason for the son's chest and spinal pains as well as his wife's constant cardiac and lung pains, the young couple decided to stop corn farming to go to Hanoi for working, leaving their first son and 2 ha of corn field fully occupied by weeds to their mother.

Holding the photo taken with her husband Lo Van Cuong, Ms. Ha Thi Lam shared her sad story in tears. Her husband had some mental problems. One day, when no one was at home, he drank a cup of herbicide.



Ms. Lam showing the bottle of herbicide that had killed her husband

He was taken to the Mai Son hospital in the very bad condition. His body turned into black, his mouth ulcerated, and his throat was as black as the herbicide. He felt like being burnt from inside and refused blanket even it was the cold winter time. He felt thirsty and asked for water all the time. However, drinking water even made him much worse, because his digestive system started to be destroyed. Finally, after 14 days of suffering and struggling with the diseases, he died at the age of 44. The bottle of herbicide is still there as an evidence of the reason causing his death. This story happened in the beginning of 2017 in Hoc village.



Ms. Lam and the photo with her husband

According to Mr. Ma A Thai, the head of Ta Hoc communal police, there have been six suicides since 2015, four of them were involved in herbicide.

I asked Ms. Lam: “Who usually does spray herbicide in your family?” “The elder son Lo Van Hung does, because he has got married and has two children. His younger brother Lo Van Hai is not allowed to expose to herbicide since he is still young and single” – she answered.

The soldier’s last battle

Many people are well aware of how toxic herbicide is, while others not. Mr. Mua A Chua, the head of Phu Nhi village, Phieng Ban commune, Bac Yen district, Son La province said: he

himself sees many bottle caps of slow-acting herbicide cleaned to be re-used as cups for drinking alcohol due to its durability and convenience.

Nobody knows about the danger of herbicide better than those who spray it for making money for their living. Ms. Hoang Thi Thiet, the wife of Mr. Hoang Van Khuyen from Lao Lay village of Thai ethnic group in Phieng Ban commune is in tears when talking about her late husband. He did herbicide spraying for money for 10 years. Although he knew that this kind of work was very dangerous for health, he kept doing it in order to earn enough money to pay tuition for his son, who was learning at the provincial Teacher's College.



Ms. Thiet and the photo of her husband

He sprayed all types of herbicide and never refused any hard work. At first, the labor cost for spraying one barrel of herbicide is VND 5,000. After a few years, the cost increased to VND 10,000 or even VND 20,000 per barrel. Sometimes he could spray as much as 30 bottles per

crop. Seeing him so exhausted from overworking, Ms. Thiet tried to convince her husband to stop working several times, but he said: “If I stop spraying herbicide, who else makes money to pay the tuition?” Besides spraying work, he also did other works to get more money for his son, such as hunting frogs or milling rice. He worked harder and harder day by day with the hope that one day his son would become a teacher.

Ms. Thiet continued: “ Not only worked on our own field, he also sprayed herbicide for his relatives and others for money, which took him more than one month to work on the field and expose to approx. one hundred kilos of herbicide. Once the spraying season comes, the color of his skin changed from yellow to pink and then black at the end of the season. He lost weight, his skin become unhealthy and he suffered from abdominal obstruction. Then his hands and legs started shaking, and he experienced nausea like the drunk. He coughed a lot upon waking up. He ate less and less, from five or six cups of rice to only one cup. He was told by the doctors that he needed detoxification due to too much exposure to herbicide”.

Time flied, and he got weaker and weaker. His wife had to work very hard to pay for his medical treatment. On March 2, he suddenly felt down and died at the age of 42.

I look at the photo of a young man in the army uniform. He, the soldier who had won the enemy in the resistant war for the national independence, finally lost in the herbicide war, leaving his wife and two children behind. His dream also never came true. His son, who couldn't afford money for a good job after the graduation from the Teacher's College, had to leave the village to work in Hanoi city as a builder.