

## **Shocked with herbicide abuse in the upland Son La province**

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Whenever travelling throughout northwest of Vietnam, it is not rare to see houses with walls made of empty bottles of plant protection products and the abuse of this “toxic substance” despite of their consequences. In this article, The Vietnam Agriculture would like to address the danger of these acts through different stories as the warnings to farmers nation-wide, who have risked their lives for livelihood...

The houses are very small, low and dark, hiding different family tragedies inside as a result of risking lives for livelihood and leaving land uncultivated of part of the farmers who fall into the deadlock without way out.

Ms. Mua Thi Don pours herbicide powder into a barrel and stirs with her bare hands, producing white bubbles like soap running through the hill.



Ms. Don stirring herbicide with her bare hands

### **Herbicide and free absorbents**

The working day of Mr.T.N.H (anonymous), the Technical Director of a foreign company is quite busy with telephoning different Departments of Intensive care & Anti-poison of big hospitals nation-wide to check how many cases of herbicide poisoning of the month, and whether the absorbents run out or expire for further exchange.

Since being introduced in Vietnam, the sales of Paraquat - the most widely used herbicide is always promoted with free absorbents called “Fuller’s Earth”, which is a special clay material used in medicine to absorb toxics from the human body then remove them out through the excretory system. This substance is recommended for treatment of those patients who drink Paraquat. They are imported for free distribution to anti-poison centers at national and grassroots

levels. (Later replaced by activated carbon). The statistics show that in Bach Mai hospital alone, the number of Paraquat-poisoned patients under intensive care has increasingly grows, from 300 cases (in 2014) to 350 cases (in 2015), and reached to 450 cases in 2016. About 70% - 80% of them did not have enough time to take Fuller's Earth before dying.

Paraquat is just one among many other types of herbicide that have killed weeds and human beings in Vietnam. This is the reason why we decided to go the northwestern part of the country for an investigation. Ironically, plant protection products companies have cheated the local people by keeping advertising that their toxics-free products are the best choice for farmers, which makes most of them to abuse herbicide in the region.



Carrying the barrel of herbicide for spraying

I followed Mr. Vang A Mua, the head of Pan No B village, Ta Hoc commune, Mai Son district, Son La province to climb to the Pa No Mount in a rainy day to get to the village. Although the distance is just eight kilometers, it was so muddy and slippery that I felt so exhausted.

There are 42 families living in Pa No B village, 20 of them are very poor. The villagers have been planting hybrid corn for 16 years, but they have only used herbicide since 2010. In the past, the Mua's family could plant only 40 kg of corn (equal to 2 ha), because they had to clear weeds by hands. Their fight against weeds lasted for 180 days from March to August without any break.

However, since they apply herbicide, they can plant 80 kg of corn (equal to 4 ha) and spend just 5 days to kill weeds with the use of 80 bottles of herbicide (900m/l per each bottle).

### **Spraying festival**

I got up early and was so surprised to see so many houses around the village have built on empty bottles of herbicide. For instance, the Vang A Su's house wall was built with hundreds of bottles of herbicide of different types: quick-acting white and square-shaped, slow-acting green and round-shaped and slow-acting red and round-shaped bottles.



A house was built with bottles of herbicide

Mr. Su was born in 1972 and has four wives. At the moment, he is living with these two wives, Ms. Mua Thi Tong and Ms. Ly Thi Chu. His house was built several years ago by the Hmong builders coming from Chieu village, Bac Yen district at the cost of VND 6 million plus one 30-kilo pig.

According to Su, the bottles of herbicide are collected and put in a long row around the house to separate between the ground and the wooden wall in order to get more sunlight and wind and to prevent livestock. “Do you feel scare of living in that house, don’t you?” - I asked. He shook his head and said: “At first it smelled a little bit, but after a while it was gone completely”. Since the corn’ price drops, he plants only eight kilo instead of 40 kilo per crop. At the moment, he owes Mr. Dung, the investor from Hat Lot township 60 million Dong. (The villagers often buy seeds and materials from the investor on credit at high price or high interest rate).

His third wife Ms. Mua Thi Tong is currently living in the “herbicide house”, while the fourth wife is living in the corn house nearby to avoid the conflict. Both of them have to spray herbicide even when they are pregnant. When Ms. Tong gave birth to Vang A Penh, the baby was very week and seek all the time. He died after five months of birth.

Most of the Hmong people live in the remote area with no road and no access to health care services. They do self-delivery. Their lives have changed since herbicide has been introduced to the village. The couple Vang A Nenh and Trang Thi Ly used to have two children. The first one died after just 3 days of birth, the second one – one month of birth.



## The barrel of herbicide above the cloud

Mr. Vang A Lu and Ms. Hang Thi Lu also live in the "herbicide house". Mr. Lu explained that he made the wall with the bottles of herbicide to prevent it from woodworms. By the time he built the house, herbicide was strictly prohibited in the village, and those who violate the regulation shall be fined VND 25,000 per bottle. Therefore, he could collect no so many, just enough for one wall.

Each crop the couple plants 50 kilos of corn and uses up to 60 bottles of herbicide (900ml per bottle). However, the more they plant, the more they owe, which reaches up to 60 million Dong. After four years of marriage, the finally had a girl Vang Thi De. Unfortunately, one month after birth, the baby died. It happened in October 2016.





Spraying herbicide

I came with Mr. Lu to the cemetery forest to visit the baby's grave, which is very low with some rocks and a wild thorny tree with blood-alike red fruits on the top.

It stopped raining. The village suddenly echoed big sounds of herbicide sprayers. I saw women carrying huge 100 liter barrels on their backs, followed by kids holding hoses and tubes, and men walking behind with engines in hands. The big crowd was talking and laughing like in the festival. After the rain, everything looked fresh and lush. High humidity makes the toxics more effective that can kill weeds very quickly.

Pa No village is located on the top of the mountain and above the clouds. However, there are other clouds even higher – the "herbicide clouds" spraying out in the middle of the sky and submerging human beings in their innocent and deadly white color.