



## Vietnam und the Legacy of war

**When George Bush arrives in Hanoi this week for a trade summit, he will see a country which has prospered during three decades of peace - but is still scarred by conflict.**

Thirty-one years have passed since the fall of Saigon brought an ignominious end to the Vietnam War. The last US troops had left two years earlier. Yet it continues to haunt the American psyche, especially today, when so many parallels can be drawn with the current situation in Iraq.

Images of Vietnam remain profoundly influenced by the war: forests defoliated by Agent Orange; the massacre at My Lai; B-52 bombers dropping their deadly load; people fighting to board a helicopter as it takes off from the roof of the US embassy; a little girl running in terror, her body scorched by napalm.

But while reminders of that conflicts are still visible, modern Vietnam is very different from the place abandoned to the Vietcong in 1975 – as President George Bush is set to discover this Friday when he arrives for the Asia-Pacific summit. It is a country of elegant colonial-era hotels restored to five-star luxury, restaurants offering the best of Asian and French cuisine, golf courses, and upmarket shops rivalling those of Singapore and Hong Kong.

The Vietnamese economy – devastated by decades of fighting, the destruction of much of the infrastructure and the dead hand of communism – is booming, fuelled to a large degree by tourism. A country that was once a byword for death and devastation is now a chic travel destination, and a must-do stop on the backpacker trail.

America – which lifted its trade embargo, in place since the war, in 1994 – has become Vietnam's biggest trading partner. Vietnam exports about \$ 7bn worth of goods to its former enemy every year. Business travellers marvel at the gleaming new hotels and office blocks springing up in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City – the motorbike-choked southern metropolis still called Saigon by the locals. (...)

The country has undergone two decades of economic liberalisation, or doi moi (“Renovation”). The process was slow for a long time, but accelerated in recent years, and Vietnam is now the fastest-growing economy in south-east Asia, and the newest member of the World Trade Organisation. (...)

But despite its wholehearted embrace of capitalism, and the way it has opened itself up to the outside world, Vietnam – one of the few communist countries left – remains an authoritarian one-party state. Political opposition is not brooked, and dissidents are harassed and detained. Pluralism, democracy, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion are alien concepts. Hundreds of political and religious dissidents languish in jail. (...)

The legacy of the Vietnam War lingers on, too. Visitors are struck by the number of people with missing limbs. Since the war ended, an estimated 10.000 Vietnamese have been killed or maimed by landmines.





And, more than 30 years after the end of the war, children continue to be born with terrible deformities, the legacy of Agent Orange and other chemical defoliants that were sprayed from the air to destroy the jungle hideouts of Vietcongs guerillas.

The Vietnames government estimates that half a million children have been born with congenital defects, and that two million have suffered cancers and other ill effects. (...) Unlike American war veterans, the victims of Agent Orange have never received compensation. US servicemen who came into contact with the chemical, received al multimillion-dollar settlement after suing the manufactures in 1984.

A report published earlier this year, meanwhile, found that much of the environmental damage caused by the defoliants has not been repaired. An estimated 20 million gallons of chemicals wered dumped on Vietnam´s forests by the Americans between 1961 and 1971. (...)

More than half of Vietnam´s population is under 30, with no memory of the horrors of war. For young people, particulary members of the emerging middle class; new cars and designer labels are the status symbols of choice. Sadly, there is also a thriving trade in child prostitution. A sizeable proportion of visitors are child sex tourists.

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