

Vietnam protests Dow Olympic sponsorship over Agent Orange crimes

Though the two major manufacturers of Agent Orange are making money in Vietnam, the government has lodged an official complaint over Dow Chemical's sponsorship of the Olympics

By AN DIEN

His children are 36 and 33 years old, but they look just like three-year-old boys who still scream through the night, smash anything they find in the house, and bite their parents' hands for comfort.

In 1968, Nguyen Van Tao, from the northern province of Thai Nguyen, fought to expel the American army from the A Luoi Valley in what is now the central province of Thua Thien-Hue. The US drenched the area with Agent Orange for ten years, 1961-1971 period.

Tao said he was exposed to Agent Orange and blamed his sons' mental and physical health problems on dioxin, a highly toxic chemical in the herbicide, which US troops used to strip Vietnamese forces of ground cover and food.

But like up to 4.8 million Vietnamese victims who were exposed to the poison, Tao has no idea when its producers will pay them the damages they demand.

"I even don't know who they [the producers] are," Tao told *Vietweek*.

But he might soon as Dow Chemical Company, one of the two major manufacturers of Agent Orange, is all set to crank up its global profile through a 10-year US\$100-million Olympic sponsorship. The US chemical giant will give away \$100 million every four years to sponsor the Olympics through 2020.

Right groups, activists, and even politicians have urged organizers to jettison Dow's sponsorship of this year's Olympic Games in London over the company's link to an Indian tragedy 28 years ago. Around 15,000 residents of Bhopal, India, died in the aftermath of a 1984 gas leak at a pesticide factory that was owned by a subsidiary of Union Carbide, which sold the facility in 1994. Dow bought Union Carbide in 2001.

The Vietnamese government has also joined the fight, calling on the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to rethink their



PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

Greenpeace demonstrators dress as skeletons to represent the dead to protest Dow Chemical's not paying compensation and clearing up the affected area in Bhopal, India where in 1984 a toxic gas leak at an insecticide plant killed around 15,000 people. The Vietnamese government has also called on the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to jettison Dow's sponsorship of this year's Olympic Games in London over its Agent Orange 'crime.'

tie-up with Dow.

In a letter sent May 2 to the IOC, Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism Hoang Tuan Anh expressed the "profound concerns" of the Vietnamese government and its people about Dow's involvement in the London 2012 Olympics given its notorious record of producing Agent Orange.

"What is worth condemning is the fact that, despite [international opinion], Dow Chemical expressed their indifference and refused compensation for the victims of the Agent Orange produced by the company, as well as their responsibility to clean up contaminated areas," said the letter, obtained by *Vietweek*.

The letter called the acceptance of Dow's sponsorship a "hasty decision" by the IOC.

American political author Noam Chomsky said it was "entirely appropriate" for Vietnam to object to Dow's sponsorship.

"The use of Agent Orange was a major war crime. The victims have been largely ignored, another crime," Chomsky wrote in an email to *Vietweek*.

"Responsibility is shared by Dow Chemical (and the US government as well)," Chomsky said.

The fact that the Vietnamese

government has officially voiced its opposition could lend more leverage to the thousands of activists that have been working against Dow all over the world, said Daniel Korschun, an assistant professor at Drexel University's LeBow Center for Corporate Reputation Management.

"[It] cites Dow's manufacturing of Agent Orange in the 1960's, which broadens the attack on Dow; so far it had been criticized mostly for the gas leak in Bhopal," Korschun said.

Who bullies who?

Hoang Vinh Giang, general secretary of the Vietnam National Olympic Committee, ruled out any boycott of the Vietnamese delegation at the London Olympic, even if Dow remains a sponsor.

"We just hope the IOC will have an appropriate attitude toward Dow and urge the company to stop evading its due responsibility," Giang told *Vietweek*.

"For how many years has Dow disdained the agonies of generations of Vietnamese victims?"

The IOC confirmed Monday (May 7) it had received the letter from the Vietnamese government.

"The [IOC] does not enter into agreements with any organization

that it believes does not work in accordance with the values of the Olympic Movement as set forth in the Olympic Charter," the IOC said in a statement emailed to *Vietweek*.

It said it had reached the partnership agreement with Dow in 2010 and before that, the IOC had "studied carefully" the history of the company.

The IOC called Dow, which was listed as the second worst polluter in the world by the US Environmental Protection Agency in 2010, a "global leader in its field of business" and said the company was "committed to good corporate citizenship."

Scot Wheeler, a Dow spokesman, dismissed the Vietnamese letter as both "misguided" and "wrongly focused".

"Under the authority of the War Production Act, the US government compelled many companies, including Dow, to produce the herbicides that were used during the conflict," Wheeler said.

Dow's vice-president of Olympic operations George Hamilton also described the company's critics as "irresponsible" in March.

"This issue is not our issue," Hamilton was quoted by *The Guardian* as saying. "We're not going to be bullied by activists or

politicians who want to get involved in this, whatever their driver may be."

Since the Bhopal tragedy, India, Amnesty International, Greenpeace and some members of the British Parliament have demanded Dow increase a \$470-million compensation package that Union Carbide paid victims in 1989, *Reuters* reported. The Indian government wants Dow to pay an additional \$1.7 billion, but Dow has refused, saying it has no responsibility for Bhopal and that Union Carbide settled liabilities, the newswire said.

"So far, Dow has taken a hard line by claiming that the responsibility for Bhopal lies with others. Dow is taking a bit of a gamble in this regard," said Korschun, the corporate reputation management expert.

"By maintaining such a hard line, Dow may inadvertently contribute to a narrative that it is the bully," Korschun said.

'Ultimate goal'

Tao, the Vietnamese veteran exposed to Agent Orange, said he did not know who would take care of his sons when he and his wife die. He is 69 and his wife 62 years old.

"I just don't want to think about tomorrow," Tao said.

"No people have suffered more from the products of Monsanto and Dow Chemical - manufacturers of the infamous Agent Orange - than the Vietnamese people," said John Pilger, a former war correspondent in Vietnam and a vocal critic of American and British foreign policies.

"But isn't Vietnam itself doing business with Monsanto or Dow?" Pilger said.

Both Dow and Monsanto have set up representative offices in Vietnam. The Vietnamese government has licensed Monsanto to carry out lab research and tests on the application of the controversial genetically modified maize in the country.

Senior Lieutenant General Nguyen Van Rinh, former deputy defense minister, chairman of the Vietnam Association of Victims of Agent Orange, and a sitting legislator, did grill the Agriculture Minister at a plenary parliamentary session last November about allowing Dow and Monsanto to re-enter Vietnam.

But Rinh said the minister had evaded his questions.

Rinh said he would continue asking the government about this when the National Assembly, Vietnam's legislature, convenes its biannual session this month.

"My ultimate goal is," Rinh said, "to push the government to get both Dow and Monsanto out of Vietnam." **vw**