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Vietnamese Earth Is Still Explosive

Hanoi

Imagine playing on a football field that has 100 unexploded bombs, shells or mines waiting to go off underneath the turf.

That is what living in parts of Vietnam is like today. According to the North Vietnamese army newspaper Quan Dan Nhan Doi, the soil of some regions of Vietnam contains an average of one unexploded American bomb, shell or other explosive charge for every 50 square yards of ground.

The newspaper reported that bomb disposal teams in Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces just below the former "demilitarized zone" between North and South Vietnam had destroyed a total of 264,359 bombs and other explosive devices of all kinds uncovered while clearing about 3200 acres of farmland or other usable land over the past two months.

For anyone who has flown over this region at a relatively low altitude, these figures seem entirely plausible. During a recent flight over the regions that were the hardest hit by American artillery and bombers, I could see craters of all sizes that often ran into each other. They covered a tract of land stretching from the North Vietnamese port of Vinh to the former American base at Da Nang — from roughly the 19th parallel to the 16th parallel.

During the war, American planes dropped almost eight mil-

lion tons of bombs on Indochina, to say nothing of anti-personnel cluster bombs and mines that ranged in size from devices intended to sink ships to explosive charges no bigger than a postage stamp aimed at crippling an infantryman.

There were also millions of shells fired by field guns or by naval vessels. As one of the small band of correspondents who covered a visit by former American Attorney General Ramsey Clark during a journey along the southern coast of North Vietnam in 1972, I well remember the rude awakenings in the morning provided by courtesy of the U.S. Navy, which would keep up its shelling throughout the entire day.

As other wars have shown, many of these shells, bombs and mines did not go off. Among the most fearsome are the "spider mines" triggered by short nylon cords that lie hidden in the bush, waiting to explode if no more than a foot or a hand brushes against them.

The Vietnamese press has remained silent for a long time over this problem but now it is being brought out into the open. Quan Dan Nhan Doi stressed that the people of Vietnam today face a new battle front "which be very arduous and often marked by bloodshed."

The newspaper emphasized that "this battle against the enemy hidden beneath the ground will go on for years and years" and called for the mobilization of bomb disposal teams of military men, militia and civilians with rudimentary training in dealing with explosives.

To some observers, this mobilization call was also seen as an appeal to a people who thought they had bade their farewell to arms with the ending of the war in Indochina to be ready to face new loss of life in its aftermath.

Agence France-Presse