

On 9 October I returned to Vietnam to begin a three-week stay. As usual, I spent the first several days in Hanoi working with the AIDS Division. On 14 October, along with Dr Huang and Manh, two staff from the AIDS Division, I travelled to Dien Bien Phu in Lai Chau province, a 50-minute flight west of Hanoi.



Back in Vietnam

9 - 31 October 2002

This was my second visit to Dien Bien Phu, so I felt like a native. At least I knew the lay of the land, not difficult given its size...about 40,000 people in the city, and another



Late afternoon, about 5km outside of Dien Bien Phu city...on the road to Laos.

Development Bank (ADB) project I'm working on (www.jfpr-hiv.org).

A variety of activities have been planned to take place in Dien Bien Phu this year targeting sex workers and injecting drug users (IDU), the two groups most affected by HIV/AIDS throughout Vietnam.



Planned activities include HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns, peer education, social marketing of condoms, and out-reach activities by government health staff. At least that's what's on paper.

So far not too much has happened. The Dien Bien Phu Provincial Health

20,000 or so in the valley.

We were following up on BCC (Behaviour Change Communication) activities being carried out with support from the Asian

Department admits that they've bitten off more than they can chew...trying to please the ADB project designers who want to see money spent (their way of measuring progress). A good part of day one was spent working on "reprogramming" the money for 2002, trying to come up with a more rational, realistic way to use it in 2003.

One activity that has gotten under way is "peer education". A total of 25 peer educators have been selected and trained in Lai Chau, 10 of whom are working in the Dien Bien Phu area. In Thailand and



Meeting with Lai Chau Provincial Health Department staff in Dien Bien Phu.

Cambodia, where peer education has been going on for some time, peer educators (as the word implies) are members of the

same group as those on the receiving end of the education - sex workers passing on information to sex workers, IDUs to IDUs, factory workers to factory workers, etc. But its application in Vietnam is a bit different.

Since prostitution and drug use are high on the list of "social evils", the government doesn't allow for "current" sex workers or drug users to work as peer educators. Instead, former or "reformed" individuals are selected peer educa-



A peer educator recruited by the Dien Bien Phu district health centre. A former sex worker, this woman recently learned she is HIV positive.

tors. We met with three peer educators - one former drug user and two former sex workers. The former drug user had stopped shooting heroin 12 years ago. The two former sex workers had only recently stopped work; both had just learned that they are HIV positive.

In spite of this they both maintain a positive attitude, and appear more than eager to promote the use of condoms by their former colleagues. Hopefully they'll be effective.

Following two days in Dien Bien Phu, my travel colleagues, Drs Manh and Huang from the AIDS



Dien Bien Phu airport

Division, and I returned to Hanoi for one night. On Thursday morning we flew to Hue, the ancient imperial capital of Vietnam. Our eventual destination was Dong Ha

city, the capital of Quang Tri province in central Vietnam, a two-hour drive north from Hue.

As some of you may recall, Hue was the scene of heavy fighting during the Tet Offensive of 1968. Between what the French managed to destroy in the late 40s' and early 50s', and what the American's managed to do in the 60s', not much is left of the Imperial City. We spent a couple of hours in Hue, roaming around the Imperial City ruins and having lunch. We then headed on to Dong Ha, the capital of Quang Tri province.



Travel colleagues Dr Huang (left) and Dr Manh.

I work with Drs Huang and Manh when I visit Vietnam. For the past four years Huang worked for the Ministry of Health and the World Health Organisation.

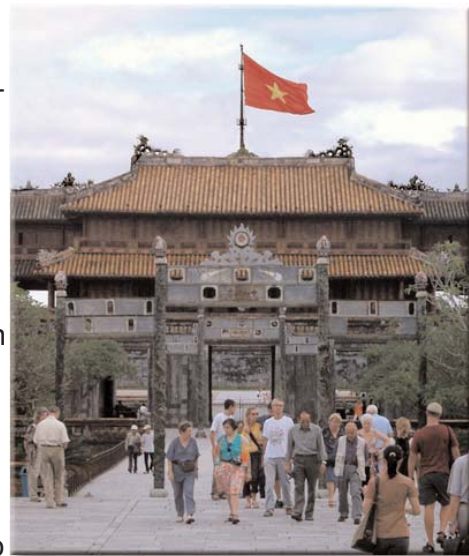
She's now with our ADB project. Manh got his medical degree in Uzbekistan several years ago. He arrived in Uzbekistan when he was 18 years old and spent nearly 14 years there. Of course his first language is Vietnamese. His second is Russian. Uzbekistani comes in third, and English a distant fourth.

Quang Tri is a famous site in the Vietnamese-American war. It's where Khe Sanh is located, as well as the DMZ...the division between North and South Vietnam during the war.

The effects of the war linger on. According to a recent report on the BBC Quang Tri has the highest density of unexploded ordnance of any province in Vietnam. Every year several people are injured or killed when they hit bombs buried under ground in the course of working their fields, or building homes.

Quang Tri also has the highest rate of birth defects - both mental and physical - attributed to the massive spraying of Agent Orange by the Americans. According to the people I'm working with, the Vietnamese government has repeatedly tried to get the American government to acknowledge the devastation caused by Agent Orange. So far there's been no response by the American government.

There are, however, efforts by private citizens, including Vietnam War Veterans, to alleviate some of the pain; programmes have been set up to provide medical aid and prosthesis to citizens of Quang Tri injured by left over ordinance, and a certain level medical care is provided to the children and young adults affected by Agent Orange.



The latest invasion force in Hue; tourists. The shot above is inside the Imperial City compound, looking back at the main gate. In the opposite direction (below), not much is left standing.

