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Photo cache may hold key to MIAs' fate

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The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — U.S. officials on a weekend trip to Vietnam gained access to a cache of secret information, including thousands of photographs, that could shed light on the fate of Americans missing in action in the Vietnam War, government sources said Tuesday.

"There's a good chance we'll get a lot of cases solved — dozens, hundreds maybe," said one Defense Department official, like others speaking only on the condition of anonymity.

One source said the photographs are all of dead servicemen.

Another official said intelligence personnel are "working night and day" to glean clues to what became of U.S. servicemen believed captured or killed.

If positive identifications are made, families of the missing men will be notified first, the officials said. President Bush is to be briefed on the results Thursday; then there will be a

public announcement.

At the Pentagon, spokesman Bob Hall refused to comment on the situation except to promise that, if new information is developed, "we will talk fairly quickly with the families to alert them to the issue."

Another official said the information "may be a whole new vein" of evidence about those listed as prisoners of war or missing in action during that war. It could be especially useful in pursuing the scores of so-called "discrepancy cases," in which servicemen were last seen or heard from alive, but in imminent danger of capture.

"We know it's good, but we won't know how good until we can check it against what we already know," said the official.

A Senate source said between 4,000 and 5,000 photos are in the newly uncovered archives, but many are duplicates, or different shots of the same individuals. And, he said, "They all deal with dead people."

The United States had long suspected that

such information, which reportedly includes more than 4,000 photos, existed in Vietnam. But the trip over the weekend to Hanoi by retired Gen. John Vessey Jr. and Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., was the first time its existence has been officially acknowledged.

Vessey is President Bush's special emissary for POW-MIA affairs, and McCain is a former Vietnam prisoner of war and a member of the Senate's Select Committee on POW-MIA Affairs.

The three-day trip was hastily arranged after the United States got word that Vietnam was prepared to cooperate in turning over material it has previously held back.

In addition to the photos, there may be other documentation that could shed light on the fate of POWs and MIAs. That could include reports of aircraft being shot down, prisoner lists or other data, the officials said.

One official said the information appears to be the most important breakthrough in the long POW-MIA effort in two decades.