

U.S. to begin largest search yet for MIAs in Vietnam

Associated Press

HANOI, Vietnam — The United States on Thursday will launch its largest search mission for Americans missing in action since the end of the war, as Washington and Hanoi continue to edge toward better relations.

The operation comes at a time when the United States is assessing the issue of MIAs and when and how to move ahead in lifting its 19-year trade embargo against its former enemy.

Some Western diplomats and businessmen anticipate that such a move will be made this year. A dozen U.S. companies already have registered to bid for about \$300 million in internationally financed highway projects after an easing of the embargo last September by President Clinton.

Army Maj. Gen. Thomas H. Needham, the commander of the American search operation, said a review of the MIA situation was under way in Washington.

Mr. Clinton has made further steps toward renewing trade and diplomatic relations with Vietnam contingent on its progress in the fullest possible accounting of the 2,239 Americans still unaccounted for.

"From my perspective of working here in Vietnam, I'm very pleased with the progress," Gen. Needham said in a recent interview. "We have been allowed to go where we want to go in the country."

Some veterans organizations and MIA family members oppose renewed ties with Vietnam just now, claiming Hanoi continues to withhold information.

Gen. Needham conceded that the Vietnamese could do more.

"The Vietnamese could keep looking for documents," he said. "I encourage them at every point to try to find more documents."

Still, he doesn't believe that the government is holding back remains.

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