

Pentagon gives Hanoi high marks on key test
(Adds details, background; replaces WASHINGTON VIETNAM-USA
story on schedule)

By Jim Wolf

WASHINGTON (Reuter) - The Defense Department Thursday applauded a high-profile batch of documents handed over by Hanoi, calling them the most informative to date on Americans still listed as missing from the Vietnam War.

President Clinton said this month that he was awaiting analysis of the 116 documents before making the emotionally charged decision on possible full normalization of relations with Hanoi, an old wartime foe.

In its final analysis of the 187 untranslated pages handed to a U.S. presidential delegation on May 15, the Pentagon said they "demonstrated the SRV's (Socialist Republic of Vietnam's) effort to more systematically review archival materials outside Hanoi and turn over this material to the U.S. government."

"This particular group of unilaterally collected documents is the most detailed and informative of the reports received to date," said the analysis, released by the Pentagon office

responsible for international security affairs.

The records in question make up the fourth of five batches unilaterally handed over by Hanoi beginning in September 1993, Pentagon officials said. The latest group of 44, totalling 86 pages, was given to a congressional delegation May 30.

The Pentagon report Thursday said the May 30 materials, "like the set given to the presidential delegation, contain new leads which will assist in the accounting process."

Clinton threw the spotlight on the documents brought back by the team he sent to Vietnam, telling a news conference on June 9 he was having them analyzed to gauge if Hanoi was meeting tests of cooperation he laid down as a condition for normalized ties.

The Vietnam normalization issue is freighted with political risk for Clinton, who faces a tough battle for reelection next year. Senate Majority leader Bob Dole, front-runner for the Republican nomination to oppose him, opposes early normalization, as do many of the families of the missing and the American Legion, the nation's biggest veterans' group with 3.1 million members.

Some conservative Republicans in Congress, including Dole, have introduced legislation that would deny funds for a U.S.

embassy in Hanoi until Clinton certifies that Vietnam has been fully cooperative on the MIA issue, something they believe he cannot honestly do now.

Many of Clinton's national security advisers favor full diplomatic ties as the best way to continue pressing for the fullest possible accounting of the missing. Many also regard such ties with Vietnam as long overdue to advance U.S. economic and strategic interests in East Asia.

The Pentagon lists 2,202 Americans as missing in action or unaccounted for from the war, which the U.S.-backed government in Saigon lost to Hanoi-led communist forces in 1975.

The new Pentagon analysis said the material given to the presidential delegation led by Herschel Gober, deputy secretary of veterans affairs, would not result in the immediate resolution of any cases. But it said, "As this information is assessed in context with all other information known for a related case, (the Defense Department) can pursue these new leads to move toward a fuller accounting."

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