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◆Vietnam Says MIA Progress Better Since US Trade Embargo Ended<

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HO CHI MINH CITY, Vietnam (AP) — Vietnamese officials said on Monday they've made faster progress in amassing clues to the fate of missing Americans since the United States removed its 19-year economic embargo against Vietnam in February.

In an indication of warming relations between the former battlefield foes, a senior U.S. delegation announced a gift of dlns 200,000 to help provide artificial limbs to amputees in southern Vietnam.

"The lifting of the embargo has already given us very favorable conditions for our work," said Nguyen Hong Linh, head of the Vietnamese MIA office in Ho Chi Minh City.

Linh spoke to some of the highest-ranking U.S. officials to visit Vietnam since the end of the war in 1975. Hershel Gober, deputy secretary of veterans affairs, led the 35 Americans, who were ending a four-day trip that focused on ways to intensify Vietnam's cooperation on the MIA issue.

Linh reinforced comments that Deputy Foreign Minister Le Mai made last Friday in Hanoi. Results from the two nationwide searches for clues to the missing conducted since the embargo ended on Feb. 3 were among the best in five years, Mai said.

Ordinary Vietnamese are more enthusiastic now about turning over documents, photographs and battlefield souvenirs that may help resolve some of the remaining American MIA cases, Linh said. Precise details were unclear, however.

In one example, Linh said that local police offered Vietnamese investigators the use of a motorboat to travel on a river to interview possible witnesses of a live American reportedly held in captivity. The report proved false, but the eagerness of police to cooperate stemmed from the goodwill President Clinton earned with his removal of the embargo, Linh said.

Visiting representatives of five American veterans organizations said they all disagreed at the time with Clinton's decision to end sanctions.

The President based his decision partly on the likelihood that Vietnamese cooperation would improve as a result, said Assistant Secretary of State Winston Lord. Both the veterans groups and the U.S. administration would be looking for "concrete results" in the future to justify this rationale, Lord told Linh.

The Americans thanked the Vietnamese for their help so far and asked for further voluntary assistance from the Vietnamese government and people.

The United States took a step toward closer relations itself, with Gober's announcement later in the morning of the gift to the Thu Duc Prosthetics Center in Ho Chi Minh City. The United States Agency for International Development is making the grant.

"I can't think of a better use for investment in foreign aid than something like this, taking care of people who are in many cases former soldiers of the South Vietnam Army," Gober said. The United States fought to defend former South Vietnam against communist attacks.

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Outside the center's workshop, Gober greeted and shook hands with about twenty Vietnamese who had lost both their legs. A few were white-haired veterans of the war against colonial France that ended in 1954. Others were children who said they had stepped on live mines left behind after the American war.

Gober, a Vietnam War veteran who was himself wounded in battle, spoke to the amputees in both Vietnamese and English. He and Lord each lifted legless men into wheelchairs paid for in part with Americans.

Rick Schultz, legislative director for the Disabled American Veterans, showed off his U.S.-built wheelchair to curious Vietnamese. Schultz, a Cincinnati native, lost most of both of his legs in the war.

"Obviously they're not as good as we have in the United States," he said of the artificial limbs built in Vietnam. "They're functional. That's what counts."

A complete artificial leg costs dhs 50 in Vietnam, said Tran Van Ca, a Vietnamese-American from McLean, Va. Ca is president of the organization Vietnam Assistance for the Handicapped and advises the Thu Duc facility.

The U.S. delegation flew in the afternoon to the Laotian capital of Vientiane for a one-day visit.

Lord and James Wold, deputy assistant secretary of defense for POW-MIA affairs, met earlier in the morning with the foreign minister of Laos, Somsavat Lengsavat. Lord described their talks as very wide-ranging and extensive. The main topic was Americans still unaccounted for in Laos, Lord said.

The United States lists 2,231 Americans as missing from the war, including 1,641 in Vietnam, 504 in Laos, 78 in Cambodia and eight in China. U.S. officials say that about 1,100 were killed in action but that their bodies were never recovered. Another 422 were lost over the open sea and are most likely dead, they say.

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