Associated Press
Ron Kovic speaks at Wadsworth VA Hospital

Vietnam vets vow to continue sit-in until demands met

By Yardena Arar
Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Dissident Vietnam veterans said Friday a Veterans Administration response to their complaints about poor VA treatment contained nothing new, and they vowed to continue their sit-in and hunger strike at a VA hospital until their demands are met, including a personal meeting with President Reagan.

The 17 veterans, including 11 camped out in flag-draped tents at the Wadsworth VA Hospital in Westwood and six maintaining a sit-in inside the lobby, told a news conference in the lobby they still want an independent investigation of VA hospitals nationally, improved techniques for diagnosing problems related to Agent Orange and other toxic herbicides and medical examinations for all 4.2 million Vietnam vets for current disabilities.

The veterans said a letter they received Thursday from acting VA administrator Dr. Donald L. Cusis "merely restates congressional and executive actions that have been under way for some time now."

"In fact, that communication represents a bitter disappointment to the protesting veterans since our analysis proves that the letter offers no new proposed changes in the Veterans Administration," the group said in a statement read at the news conference, although the letter was

Eleven veterans were still camped out in flag-draped tents on the Wadsworth VA Hospital grounds today, but four other veterans apparently satisfied with Reagan Administration assurances of improved veterans health care left the protest Thursday.

Custis' letter said Reagan wanted the protesters to be assured that improved medical care for veterans "will be a major priority of this administration."

Kenneth Van Glen, a 31-year-old veteran who said he had been without food for seven days, said the original six hunger strikers – supported by five more veterans who joined the protest Thursday – will continue their vigil.

Van Glen described the letter as "a very clever subterfuge of the Reagan administration to basically take the wind out of the sail of this protest."

However, Dane Stewart, one of four strikers who ended their fast, said, "We just saw the response from Reagan and it's a lot more than we thought we were going to get."

Custis' lengthy letter dealt with several of the issues that prompted angry Vietnam veterans to begin their vigil and hunger strike: research, diagnosis and treatment of problems stemming from exposure to Agent Orange and other toxic herbicides used in Vietnam, and budget measures affecting VA medical facilities.

However, the letter made no mention of delayed stress or psychological problems surfacing long after the combat experience. The veterans say current procedures for diagnosing the syndrome are inadequate and are preventing many veterans from getting treatment and disability compensation.

While the research on Agent Orange is continuing, Van Glen said, "The burden of proof should not be on the victim."

The Custis letter said the veterans "may have been unaware that the president had decided to continue the ongoing work of the Inter-agency Work Group which has been the focal point within the government for research on the possible effects of Agent Orange."

The letter said the president's budget for fiscal 1982 provides $9.54 million for such research – "more than 300 percent greater than the $3,126,000 budgeted for Agent Orange in the current fiscal year of 1981."

"Second," the letter continued, "in the overall figures for the Veterans Administration, the president's budget set out budget authority for fiscal year 1982 of $24.2 billion. This was an increase of $1.3 billion over the $22.9 billion budget authorization for the current year, 1981."

The letter said Reagan wished to correct some veterans' impressions that funding for Vietnam Veterans Outreach Centers was being discontinued. It noted that the budget resolution provides $25 million for the centers "as opposed to only $12 million" in fiscal 1981.

Judge refuses to allow