

Quiet strides in U.S.-Vietnam relations

by Linda de Hoyos

After more than 12 years since the end of the Vietnam War, the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam are finally moving cautiously but steadily toward ending their total estrangement.

The breakthrough in the long-stalemated relations came with the visit in early August of Gen. John W. Vessey, Jr. (ret.) to Hanoi as a special envoy of President Reagan. The agenda of the meetings between Vessey and Vietnamese officials, prominently Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach, centered on the possibility of U.S. humanitarian aid to Vietnam. The other official topic of discussion was greater cooperation from Hanoi in resolving the question of the 2,400 remaining American servicemen still Missing in Action (MIA).

Surprisingly, despite the State Department's rush to accommodate the Soviet Union on all other fronts, Secretary of State George Shultz tried to throw cold water on the Vessey mission. Shultz warned before the trip that although "Vietnam is raising the concept of humanitarian cooperation as a 'two-way street,' including economic assistance . . . humanitarian reciprocity is one thing, but any attempt to trade information on our missing men for economic aid is another." This was an apparent response to an earlier interview from Thach stating that if the United States wanted to solve the MIA problem, "then the Americans can help us on our wounds." Shultz's answer was a clear, "We are not interested." At the summit of foreign ministers of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Shultz reiterated the "hard line" that has made opening relations between Hanoi and Washington impossible: "It is imperative to keep pressure on the Vietnamese to end their occupation [of Cambodia]. Essential in this effort . . . is the continued isolation of Vietnam."

Nevertheless, General Vessey's trip resulted in a series of actions and agreements that represent a stride forward in U.S.-Vietnam relations:

- The United States has agreed to aid Vietnam in aiding the war wounded. According to an administration official cited by the *New York Times*, the area of artificial limbs was chosen as a "particularly suitable first step. . . . It's also especially appropriate after a war characterized by landmines and grenades in which many people were disfigured." In the first week of September, two doctors specializing in artificial limbs visited Vietnam as part of an official U.S. delegation.

- The United States has agreed to lift trade restrictions

imposed upon Vietnam for the purpose of sending humanitarian aid to Vietnam, and will encourage charitable organizations to send relief to the country.

- The United States and Vietnam reached an agreement in principle to resume the resettlement of Vietnamese children of American fathers, the State Department reported Sept. 10.

- Vietnam announced that it has ordered the release of 6,000 Vietnamese prisoners who have been held in captivity since the end of the war. Most prisoners were associated with the former South Vietnamese government.

- A U.S. delegation visited Vietnam Aug. 25-28 to discuss 70 "discrepancy cases," those MIA cases deemed most urgent from the U.S. side.

As one administration official indicated on the U.S. agreement to humanitarian aid, "When the United States government gives its blessing to this, we're saying that they're [Vietnam] no longer a pariah. . . . This means we cross a line we never crossed before."

Broader implications

Although the public reports of the Vessey-Thach meetings are limited to agreements on aid and the MIA issue, the meetings could have far-reaching consequences. According to reliable sources in Bangkok, Vessey and Thach met for 20 hours over the span of three days, plenty of time to discuss a broad array of issues, that could have included the opening of diplomatic relations and trade and the resolution of the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia.

The Vietnamese economy appears to also have been under discussion. Agence France Presse reported Aug. 4 that, according to informed sources in Hanoi, Vietnam raised the question of its \$90 million debt to the International Monetary Fund, and of possible unofficial U.S. intervention to allow Hanoi to obtain fresh loans. Vietnam recently proposed to the IMF to repay \$30 million of its debt, if commercial banks agree to lend the remaining \$60 million. Under conditions of extreme drought and pestilence, the Vietnamese economy in the last year has staggered to a halt, and Vietnam is desperate for input from the Western nations.

For Vietnam, reconciliation with the United States has been a longstanding desire; the Vietnamese keenly desire to maintain U.S. presence in the region as a counter to pressures from China and the Soviet Union. This interest Vietnam shares with its non-communist neighbors in Southeast Asia, who have uttered no official protests over the Vessey visit or its results, with the exception of Singapore. Singapore is, however, Vietnam's number-two trading partner. From the U.S. side, particularly from those military circles who opposed the State Department policy of "constructive disengagement" from the region, setting up channels to Hanoi might eventually lead to giving Vietnam some leverage in its uneasy alliance with the Soviet Union, which retains major military bases at the U.S.-built port of Cam Ranh Bay.