

Symbolic Visit Foretells Positive Future

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HO CHI MINH CITY, Vietnam, Mar. 15, 2000 -- Senior Vietnamese leaders said March 15 they want to put the past aside and move into the future when they met U.S. Defense Secretary William S. Cohen.

Cohen in turn assured the Vietnamese the United States is willing to do the same. During a two-day visit to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, he encouraged Vietnam to restore military ties, including ship visits and military exchanges.

Cohen told reporters the reception he received from the Vietnamese was "warm, open and cordial." Overall, he said, the visit was "very productive" and "extremely positive."

Cohen acknowledged that his visit, the first by a U.S. defense secretary since the war, was largely symbolic. "But I think that it will be very helpful in leading to greater contact in the future and a more positive relationship. It was well worth the effort," he said.

"Everyone I met with seemed to be receptive to taking a step-by-step approach. We talked about flood control, demining, environmental science exchanges and more exchanges between our militaries. There was a good, genuine warm feeling throughout."

In Hanoi, Cohen met March 14 with top national leaders and visited a crash site where U.S. and Vietnamese searchers are attempting to locate remains of a Navy F-4B Phantom and its pilot. Throughout his visit, the secretary stressed that accounting for America's missing service members involves a sacred trust and remains one of the nation's top priorities.

Just as the United States is searching for its more than 2,000 missing, the Vietnamese are also investigating their own 300,000 cases. Both sides agreed to continue their cooperation in this quest for closure.

In Ho Chi Minh City, Cohen called on Lt. Gen. Phan Trung Kien, commander, 7th Military Region, and Vo Viet Thanh, Municipal People's Committee chairman. The two told Cohen how residents have concentrated on reconstruction and improving living standards.

The city, on the shores of the Mekong River in southern Vietnam, is made up of the pre-1975 Saigon and Cholon. Saigon is still "Saigon City" to many local residents. The city population is 6 million now, up from 2.5 million in 1975.

By working together, Cohen told the Vietnamese, the United States and Vietnam can build a better future. The secretary said he hoped relations with Vietnam would "unfold in a very positive way so that Vietnam can enjoy the prosperity of the entire region."

Vietnam's greatest asset, Cohen said, is its people. "Just seeing the light emanating from the eyes of the Vietnamese children, the people -- it's one of incredible energy, intelligence, exuberance, love of life," he said. "That is going to be a great natural resource for them as they move into this century."