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Vietnamese Ministry Tours U.S. Following Historic Agreement

Delegation of Vietnamese demining experts visits James Madison University's Mine Action Information Center as part of State Department-sponsored U.S. tour. Visit follows the United States's provision of $3 million in landmine aid to Vietnam.

By Keith Feigenbaum, MAIC

A five-man delegation of Vietnamese humanitarian demining experts recently toured the United States to gain an appreciation of the American view of humanitarian demining concepts and operations.

The U.S. Department of State-sponsored visit with the Vietnam Ministry of Defense included meetings with top officials in the State Department and the U.S. Department of Defense. The trip was highlighted by visits to training sites, corporations involved in mine action, and the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA)-sponsored MAIC.

The arrival of the Vietnamese delegation was led on a campus-wide tour of the MAIC and was briefed by U.S. and MAIC officials on demining information management. The MAIC also provided the results of its mine awareness campaign in Vietnam's Quang Tri province (site of the former DMZ).

Although the Vietnamese defense officials were concerned primarily with mine clearance activities, they showed special interest in the MAIC's efforts to help the local populace in Quang Tri province spot and avoid mined areas. The delegation, led by Tran Quang Khanh, deputy commander of Vietnam's Ministry of National Defense, was addressed by MAIC professors Anne Stewart and Terry Westell, who ran the mine awareness program from October 1998 - March 2000.

Tom Smith, DSCA program manager for humanitarian assistance and demining programs, outlined the program management role his office will play in shaping the emerging U.S.-Vietnam landmine project.

About the visit to the MAIC, a State Department humanitarian demining officer remarked, "The visit to JMU was great. It shows that [the United States] can do more than just provide equipment and gear to the Vietnamese mine action effort."

The visit came just months after the United States and Vietnam signed a historic bilateral agreement that will allow the Vietnamese to receive modern demining equipment and other mine-related assistance through the U.S. Humanitarian Demining Program. The Vietnamese will receive $1.75 million worth of demining gear under the June 2000 agreement to aid in the removal of the estimated 3.5 million mines, as well as vast amounts of UXO that contaminates its countryside and snarles its infrastructure.

The State Department also plans to provide $1.4 million to conduct a Level One impact survey which will help the Vietnamese to prioritize those areas which pose the greatest immediate threat to civilians, arable land and infrastructure. The DoD will target $200,000 for technical mapping of those selected sites, and $80,000 for mine awareness education and landmine database support.

Following its tour of the MAIC, the delegation visited mine action-related facilities in the Global Training Academy in Somerset, Texas, the Humanitarian Demining Training Center at Ft. Leonard Wood, Mo., and the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) and Asia-Pacific Network in Hawaii.

GERBERA: Mine Action Activities in Vietnam and Laos

In an attempt to help Vietnamese villagers resettle their UXO-contaminated homeland, Germany's GERBERA took the clearance initiative in 1998. As of July 2000, it had successfully relocated 40 families and expanded operations to Laos.

By Lisa M. Vanada, MAIC

Overview of GERBERA

The GERBERA demining organization was founded in 1994 to provide three main services: EOD activities in Germany, where the organization is based; international EOD and demining assistance; and local and international special engineer services, which include the surveillance and cleanup of any kind of environmental waste. Although GERBERA often cooperates with humanitarian associations and local governments, it is equipped to deal with every facet of a mine clearance project.

Resettlement and Relocation in Vietnam

Over 25 years ago, villagers in the Quang Tri province of Vietnam were evacuated during the Vietnam War. These villages abandoned their farms and homes for a military base situated in a nearby river valley. However, this situation was far from optimal because the river floods twice a year, limiting the agricultural success of the evacuees. In spite of the poor farming conditions, the villagers remained on the base; UXO contamination prevented them from returning to their homelands. A German NGO based in Berlin recognized the need for a resettlement program and began the process of preparing the land for the villagers' return. In May of 1998, GERBERA began mapping the two villages in the districts of Cam Lo and Ai Tu. After