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## Old-style Communist speakers blare in Vietnam's new era

By Grant McCool

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HANOI (Reuters) - It is 4.30 in the afternoon and the trees are "talking" on a street corner in Hanoi's old quarter.

No one on the crowded pavement appears to be listening to the scratchy, nasal sounds that are actually coming from loudspeakers, obscured by trees, which are used for neighborhood announcements in Communist-run Vietnam.

The loudspeakers are a throwback to the 1960s and 1970s war years when they delivered news from the front and warned people to take shelter from American aircraft bombing during Hanoi's war with a U.S.-backed South Vietnam government.

More than three decades later, they are blaring announcements about the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit that Hanoi is hosting on November 12-19.

It is Vietnam's international coming out party to showcase the higher standard of living it has achieved in the past two decades after a long history of war and poverty.

"This is an opportunity for Vietnam to promote businesses and introduce the economic potential of Vietnam to the international community," explained one announcement on the loudspeakers, which are mounted on pylons, sometimes near trees.

The daily 6.30 a.m. and 4.30 p.m. broadcasts in a male or female voice often politely begin with "Ladies and Gentlemen..." They end with an equally polite "thank you for listening to our broadcast" after covering topics such as Communist Party municipal committee meetings, avian flu prevention, vitamin regimens, sanitation and reminders to vaccinate against rabies.

Elderly people rely on the loudspeakers for word on when they can collect their pensions. Sometimes the system broadcasts patriotic songs.

The loudspeakers conjure an Orwellian image of omnipotent presence of the state in the one-party Southeast Asian country, where economic reforms have increased choices and other individual rights in recent years.

### DETAILED INFORMATION

A 15-minute loudspeaker broadcast heard on Tran Hung Dao street in the center of the capital helpfully gave the names and population figures for each of the 21 APEC members, which include economic powers the

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United States and China, among other details.

It asked "households in the neighborhood, especially those with street fronts, to keep the environment clean" during the conference.

President Bush, President Hu Jintao of China and Russian President Vladimir Putin head the list of presidents, prime ministers and cabinet ministers attending the meeting.

City workers and police officers have spruced up Hanoi with bright floral decorations and "Welcome To APEC" banners.

They have cleaned the tree-lined avenues and some of the Vietnamese and French-colonial era buildings that give the capital much of its charm.

Loudspeakers are still found in most neighborhoods of the capital of four million, carrying messages from local authorities and even banks advertising their interest rates.

Many Hanoi residents say they are annoyed by the loudspeaker announcements or simply shut them out of consciousness.

The loudspeaker system is widely used to deliver community information in agricultural countryside villages and towns, where more than 70 percent of Vietnam's 83 million people live.

One classically propagandist message heard in the past year along the crowded, narrow streets of Hanoi's old quarter said: "Reconstruction and reorganization of the Party have been done seriously and frankly, which have created more positive changes."

But the quaint loudspeakers are outdated to some in an era in which Vietnam has broadband, wireless Internet connections, cable and satellite TV and hundreds of newspapers and magazines.

"The speakers are the first things that should be put in the museum of history because they are not useful anymore and totally unnecessary in the Internet age," said Manh Ha, 34, as he sipped coffee in one of the city's many street cafes.

"But they could be something for people to remember the past."

(Additional reporting by Nguyen Nhat Lam)

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