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Rumsfeld eyes boosting military ties with Vietnam

By Paul Eckert, Asia Correspondent
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HANOI (Reuters) - U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and his Vietnamese counterpart agreed on Monday to boost military exchanges between the former battlefield enemies, Pentagon officials said.

Vietnam is one of several Asian states that the Pentagon has built close ties with to conduct its war on terrorism and to hedge against a rising China, which Washington says is too secretive about its military spending and intentions.

"It was cordial and both sides agreed we want to expand these contacts," a senior Pentagon official said after Rumsfeld's hour-long meeting with Defense Minister Pham Van Tra.

The two sides agreed to share medical training under a Pentagon-funded program and have "more visits at all levels," the official told reporters traveling with Rumsfeld on the second leg of a Southeast Asian visit.

U.S. military ties with Hanoi, 31 years after the end of the Vietnam war and 11 years after the normalization of diplomatic ties, have warmed gradually with ship visits.

Rumsfeld, the second Pentagon chief to visit communist-run Vietnam since the fall of U.S. ally South Vietnam in 1975, was due to meet Prime Minister Phan Van Khai later on Monday.

Rumsfeld, who also headed the Defense Department in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, last visited Hanoi in 1995 as a businessman.

"I hasten to congratulate you and the people of Vietnam for the amazing economic achievements that have occurred just in the last 11 years," Rumsfeld told Tra.

The military talks were held less than a week after the two countries signed a new trade pact that paves the way for Vietnam to join the World Trade Organization by year-end.

MISSING IN ACTION RECOVERY

A U.S. Navy ship would visit Vietnam this summer, the fourth in four years, Rumsfeld said.

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But he told reporters in Singapore on Sunday that "we have no plans for access to military facilities in Vietnam" and his aides stressed that ties would evolve gradually. For Hanoi, this means avoiding provoking giant neighbor China.

U.S. officials have said Vietnam, which fought a brief war with China in 1979, shares Washington's desire to have good ties with Beijing and a wariness about rapid Chinese military growth.

Exchanges under the Pentagon's International Military Education and Training (IMET) program would begin with English-language training for Vietnamese officers in San Antonio, Texas, the official said.

Further IMET exchanges "will need some time to cook and there are some restraints on our side," said the official, referring to congressional oversight that raises concerns about U.S. military partners' human rights behavior.

Rumsfeld and Tra discussed cooperation on recovering the remains of the 1,805 U.S. soldiers missing in action in Southeast Asia since the war, which killed more than 58,000 Americans and three million Vietnamese soldiers and civilians.

The Pentagon official said Washington could offer technical help for Hanoi in recovering the remains of its 300,000 missing soldiers. He added that although Vietnam was very helpful, Washington wanted more assistance searching Vietnamese archives and finding data on missing soldiers in Laos and Cambodia.

Hanoi will host President Bush in November at the annual summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum.

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