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US-Viet ties not hurt by crackdown on dissidents

But US will cut back pomp for Vietnam's President's visit to show displeasure

By Vietnam Correspondent, Roger Mitton

IN HANOI - TIES between the United States and Vietnam will continue to bloom despite all the harsh rhetoric in Washington against a recent spate of crackdowns in Hanoi, analysts say.

And both sides will ensure that Vietnam's President Nguyen Minh Triet's visit to North America in June will be a success.

Tran Quoc Hien, a pro-democracy advocate was found guilty yesterday of campaigning against the state and sentenced to five years in prison.

The lawyer was the latest in a string of dissidents to be jailed here in recent weeks for espousing political pluralism and a more open society.

Deploring the crackdown, Washington issued a statement saying: 'Such repression of individuals for their views is anachronistic and out of keeping with Vietnam's desire to prosper, modernise, and take a more prominent role in world affairs.'

In a show of displeasure, the US will downgrade the 'pomp and circumstance' given to Vietnam's President Triet when he visits from June 17 to 22.

Mr Triet will have an Oval Office meeting with President George W. Bush, but he will not get a state dinner at the White House nor will he be put up at the prestigious Blair House, but instead will stay at a Washington hotel.

Beyond these gestures, however, both sides will ensure that his visit is a success and they will not allow the political crackdown to halt warming US-Vietnam ties, analysts say.

Mr Richard Cronin, a Southeast Asian expert at Washington's Stimson Centre, said: 'The US and Vietnam are working hard to develop this relationship, and Hanoi regards President Triet's visit as highly important.'

Already, bilateral trade exceeds US\$12 billion (S\$18.2 billion) a year, and it will be further boosted if a US-Vietnam trade and investment deal is signed during Mr Triet's visit.

Said Professor Carlyle Thayer, a Vietnam expert at Australia's Defence Force Academy: 'The US and Vietnam have begun talks for a trade and investment framework agreement that could be completed in time to put icing on the cake of President Triet's visit.'

On the eve of the recent political trials, Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung met a large group of visiting business leaders from top US companies, including Boeing, Ford, Chevron, Conoco Phillips, ExxonMobil, IBM and CitiGroup.

Privately, the American businessmen said the topic of human rights never came up once in their talks with Vietnamese ministers and officials.

Said Ms Frances Zwenig, who led the US delegation: 'American investors are looking to Vietnam, not only for its great investment environment, various opportunities, but also because of the country's stable growth.'

Recently, Washington also changed its defence policy towards Hanoi and agreed to sell it non-lethal military products.

Said Mr Bush: 'The furnishing of defence articles and defence services to Vietnam will strengthen the security of the United States and promote world peace.'

During a recent visit to Hanoi, US Brigadier General John Toolan said the US was ready to sell Vietnam helicopter parts and coastal patrol craft.

Overall, the consensus is that Washington wants to cement good ties with Vietnam and that it will not allow its displeasure over the conviction of political dissidents to deflect it from that goal.

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ICING ON THE CAKE

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