

Bush hails growth in ties with Vietnam

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US President George W. Bush on Friday hailed the rapid growth in economic ties between the US and Vietnam but warned that the broader bilateral relationship risked being soured by Hanoi's recent clampdown on pro-democracy activists.

Mr Bush delivered the message during a meeting with Vietnam's President Nguyen Minh Triet at the White House, as part of the first visit to the US by a Vietnamese head of state since the Vietnam war.

The US is Vietnam's biggest trading partner, with two-way trade up 23 per cent last year from the year before to nearly \$10bn (€7.5bn, £5bn). The former enemies this week signed a trade and investment pact intended to further deepen the relationship.

But Mr Triet's six-day visit has been overshadowed by protests about the recent arrests and sentencing of several Vietnamese dissidents.

"I explained to the president we want to have good relations with Vietnam. And we've got good economic relations," said Mr Bush. "I also made it very clear that in order for relations to grow deeper, it's important for our friends to have a strong commitment to human rights and freedom and democracy."

Mr Triet promised to increase dialogue with the US about human rights but said the issue should not be allowed to "afflict our overall larger interests".

Other items on the agenda included US support for the fight against Aids in south-east Asia and co-operation in the search for the remains of US soldiers missing in Vietnam.

A few hundred Vietnamese-American pro-democracy activists gathered outside the White House shouting slogans as the leaders met.

Human rights groups have described Hanoi's crackdown on dissidents as the most severe for years, reflecting efforts by the communist regime to prevent economic growth from weakening its grip over political life.

A national legislative election in May was touted by Vietnam as evidence of growing public participation in the political process. But most of the candidates were Communist party members.

"Vietnam has now taken its place on the world economic stage but its human rights record lags far behind," said Sophie Richardson, deputy Asia director for Human Rights Watch.

Mr Triet has sought to keep the focus of his visit on trade and investment, visiting the New York Stock Exchange and US Chamber of Commerce before the White House.

More than 100 Vietnamese business leaders have accompanied him to the US, taking advantage of opportunities created by entry into the World Trade Organisation in January.

Karan Bhatia, the deputy US trade representative, described the trade and investment

framework deal signed this week as an “important step forward” in economic ties. The pact is widely viewed as a first step towards a possible bilateral free-trade deal. Although head of state, Mr Triet holds less political power than the prime minister and secretary-general of the Communist party. Phan Van Khai, the then prime minister, visited the White House in 2005 to mark the 10th anniversary of normalised ties.

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