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## In new Vietnam, exhibit recalls the hungry years

By Grant McCool  
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HANOI (Reuters) - Collector Nguyen Ngoc Tien lived through the "hard times" of hunger in Hanoi, when people used rocks to keep their place in queues to buy a few ounces of food.

Tien has compiled a private exhibit of state-issued ration coupons, a communal water tap and dozens of daily necessities from 1968 to 1989 as a reminder of the Vietnamese capital's dire poverty, a contrast to today's rapid economic growth.

"During the subsidy years, using a book to buy rice, scrambling to be the first buyer, or to buy a good bag of rice made a deep impression on me," said Tien, 48, a quietly spoken bespectacled man with a mustache.

"Those who came late could not get food," recalls Tien, whose display can be seen at his family-run Cafe Bao (Newspaper), tucked down a lane off a street with French-style houses built during colonial times.

Queues started at 3 a.m., more than four hours before shops opened, said Tien. In his hands, he held what is his most valuable and symbolic item -- a large stone scratched with a name and house number that was used to secure a place in line.

These days, Hanoi and the commercial center of Ho Chi Minh City bustle with people on motorbikes and in cars. The cities brim with small businesses and even luxury goods brand names such as Louis Vuitton and Cartier.

Vietnam wants to join the World Trade Organization, which will open businesses to more competition but allow them to trade under international rules.

Times have changed, although the Southeast Asian country of 83 million people is still poor by global standards with an annual per capita income of just \$640. Many goods and services are still cheaper, however, than in other Asian countries.

During the ruling Communist Party's five-yearly National Congress in April, leaders simultaneously cheered the successes of market reforms that began in 1986 and called for faster change to lift Vietnam out of under-development.

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The economy grew at a rate of 8.4 percent of gross domestic product in 2005, one of the world's fastest-expanding after China.

## POVERTY REDUCTION

World Bank senior poverty economist Carrie Turk said the rate at which poverty was being reduced in Vietnam was "almost globally unprecedented" and the benefits widely shared.

She said poverty in Vietnam was reduced from an estimated 70 percent of the population to 20 percent over two decades of shedding centrally planned economic policies.

"Inequality remains relatively low compared with its neighbor China for example," Turk said in her Hanoi office. "There are some people in urban areas who have become very rich but there are not enough of them to affect inequality measures."

Back at the cafe, customers drink coffee and chat or play Chinese chess. Two glass-enclosed cases display everything from a charcoal-heated clothes iron, to chipped porcelain rice bowls to pots and pans.

Tien, who also works as a journalist for a Hanoi daily paper, has a Soviet-made radio with an incorrect Vietnamese-language label and a rusted scale from Poland.

In one corner of the cafe stands an aged BMW motorbike used by a spy who was the director of a rubber plant.

The collector explained that he wanted these possessions from people all over the country because "the period when Vietnam had its subsidy system was rare in the world's history." Vietnamese remember it for low costs for staple goods but dire shortages.

## WAR AND ISOLATION

During the decades of subsidized living, Vietnam was at war and isolated from the West. It depended on support -- food, machinery and raw materials -- from the former Soviet Union and other communist or socialist countries in Eastern Europe.

The United States backed a South Vietnam regime in a war with the communist North and then imposed a trade embargo after the communists unified Vietnam in 1975. Vietnam invaded western neighbor Cambodia in 1979 and fought a brief war with China.

Seven years later, in the 1980s period Vietnamese call the "hard times," when Soviet bloc support evaporated, Party rulers began gradual reforms to ease the state's hold and encourage a market-driven economy.

The process is called "doi moi" in Vietnamese, meaning "renewal."

Ceramics shop-owner Do The Phu, 72, said he opened business 17 years ago when the street was not even paved.

"The change in the past 20 years is like the difference between heaven and earth," Phu said. "In the old times, everything was distributed by the state, now there is so much choice."

For Vietnamese sociologist Le Bach Duong, the achievement of alleviating hunger for a large number of people needs to be sustained with state and private sector involvement.

Among the most needy and vulnerable to poverty are millions of migrant workers, poor farmers and people with disabilities.

"You should create a kind of policy that builds your capacity, that can serve as a springboard but really help you to escape poverty and manage risks in your life," said Duong, director of the Institute for Social Development Studies.

(Additional reporting by Ho Binh Minh and Nguyen Van Vinh)

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