

Remarks by Ambassador Nguyen QuocCuong
At the 44th annual meeting of the National League of POW/MIA Families
June 13, 2013

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for giving me the floor. Thanks, Ann, for your kind introduction.

It is really an honor for me to be the first Vietnamese ambassador to the US to attend and speak at the annual meeting of the US National League of POW/MIA Families. I understand that you have a very impressive three-day program this year, with lots of speeches and ceremonies. So I consider myself as lucky to be the guest speaker at the very first night of your program when you are still not too tired of speeches yet. Is it right?

Let me begin my remarks today with a personal note of the war, the war which you call the “Vietnam war” and we call the “US war.” I myself was born into a family of five children during the war. Though my parents were working in Hanoi, all five of us were sent to live in rural areas, and not allowed to stay together in one place to reduce the risk of all being killed by a US bomb. Just in case, you know... I still remember vividly that almost every night, yes almost every night, I was woken up several times by piercing sirens alarming that US planes were approaching and then the sounds of shootings and bomb explosions. And we all had to rush to an underground shelter 2-5 times a night; and more often I would sleep on in that small underground shelter. For years, I only had a dream, a very simple dream for a ten-year-old-or-so kid that if only I could have had a sound straight sleep one night without being forced out of bed by US roaring jet fighters and the piercing sounds of sirens. In fact, war tragedies have got into all Vietnamese families. Yes, all families in Vietnam, to different extents. No exception. And I still believe that it is a miracle that my four siblings and I came out of the war all alive! Not all families in Vietnam were that fortunate. You may wonder why I told you that story of mine. It’s simple. Through it, I wish to convey to you the very *first message*, that is, we – the Vietnamese people - have gone through all hardships and sacrifices because of the war, so we can share with you and deeply understand that the wounds of war are suffered by both sides, especially by those families who have lost their loved ones. My heart is with you today.

Hence comes my *second message*. The understading and sympathy that I just mentioned have not been expressed by words only, but by concrete actions as well. The Government of Vietnam has consistently viewed the MIA issue as a humanitarian one. Our cooperation on MIA issues with the U.S. has always been unconditional, even though we have our own MIA problem, which is understandably much greater than yours. If you visit Vietnam nowadays, you will see that Vietnam’s National Television is still continuously broadcasting requests for MIA information from families and colleagues-in-arm of the lost soldiers, and every army’s battalion now still has a MIA

information unit. The people and government of Vietnam are doing our utmost to search for 300,000 Vietnamese soldiers still missing (yes, 300,000 missings out of 3 million deaths on the Vietnamese side, as compared to 1,983 missings out of 58,000 deaths on the US side). Together, in the context of limited resources, we still work very hard on accounting for American soldiers missing in action.

Just to give you some milestones in our unilateral and joint efforts:

(1) During the negotiations to end the war in early 1970s, Vietnam already began the work of collecting remains and information on missing American soldiers. In February 1973, the Vietnam Office of Searching for Missing Persons (VNOSMP) - consisting of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Public Security and National Defense - was set up to observe Article 8b of the Paris Peace Agreement. From 1974 to 1988, Vietnam unilaterally searched and collected remains of American soldiers, and handed over to the U.S. side 302 sets of remains.

(2) The search for MIA took a turn in 1988 with the establishment of a joint searching body between the U.S. and Vietnam. In 1991, the US opened an MIA Office in Hanoi. Additionally, three-country mechanisms – including Vietnam-the U.S.-Laos, and Vietnam-the U.S.-Cambodia – were also established to coordinate searching efforts in these countries (I am happy to acknowledge the presence here today of my two close colleagues – Ambassador Seng of Laos and Ambassador Heng of Cambodia). We also established the Vietnam Recovery Team in 2007.

(3) To date, both sides have carried out 109 joint activities, 125 repatriations with 693 out of 1983 cases resolved. Concerning 425 offshore cases, Vietnam has facilitated U.S. maritime searching activities with the participation of the U.S. navy in June 2009 and June 2011.

Those figures alone cannot give us the whole picture of the tremendous work that Vietnam and the U.S. have done so far on MIA issues. I want to emphasize that resolving MIA issue is no easy job. The searches themselves cost human lives. Shortly before leaving Vietnam to assume my duty as the Ambassador of Vietnam to the U.S. early 2011, I was informed that our two countries were about to hold an event commemorating the 10th anniversary of a helicopter crash in Quang Binh Province that killed 16 people - seven American and nine Vietnamese, including a colleague of mine at the Foreign Ministry. The anniversary would be held in the mountainous area, as close to the crash site as possible. I decided at once to go there with the Vietnam Team and the U.S. Team led by Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Robert Newberry. In the jungle, the ceremony was solemn and touching, and the sacrifice of the 16 Vietnamese and American heroes perished in the search for those missing in action are forever remembered. They represent our common value - that is our responsibility to account for all missing-in-action persons possible. Again, we should be responsible not only for those Missing in Action, but also for those who are risking and sacrificing their lives in the search.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Now, let me put our joint efforts and cooperation on MIA issue in the broader context of Vietnam-US bilateral relationship, which is also my *third message* today. The cooperation that the two countries has had on MIA issues, which former President George Bush described as an ideal model, demonstrates that we have reached a point that we are able, and determined, to leave behind a sad chapter in the history of our two nations' relationship and look forward to the future. In fact, the early POW investigation and MIA accounting and recovery efforts constituted one of the very first areas of collaboration between our two countries after the war, paving the way for the normalization of relations in 1995 and have ever since remained an important issue of mutual concern as our bilateral relations have grown rapidly in scale and scope. We particularly appreciate and are grateful for the vision and leadership that the then Senator John Kerry and Senator John McCain and many of their colleagues have shown in this regard. They deserve a big applause from all of us, don't you agree? Thank you. We also recognize the active role played by the League in resolving war legacies.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the Vietnam Office of Searching for Missing Persons, and 25th year of our joint searching body. My *fourth message* today is that on behalf of the Vietnamese Government and people, I want to re-iterate our strong commitment to continued cooperation with you, the U.S Administration and people, on the noble task of resolving the humanitarian issue of MIA searching and recovery. You can count on us in keeping up with our commitments.

Having said that, I want to conclude my remarks today with some suggestions and recommendations.

Firstly, we should re-double our efforts and put more resources on MIA work. We all know time is running against our efforts. The longer it takes, the harder it is to find the remains of our loved ones on both sides. Natural disasters, economic and social projects, aging and dying witnesses are factors that make time on our opposite side. We will try even harder in any possible way to help the U.S. side to find your loved ones. But the cooperation should be two-way. Vietnam welcomes any support from American individuals or organizations in helping us to find our lost soldiers and people. We are thankful that the U.S. side has helped collect and share information on nearly 1,000 cases, including the diary of Dang Thuy Tram that later became very well-known to many Vietnamese. We look forward to further assistance and support from all of you, your families, your friends in this regard.

Secondly, there should be more coordination by the countries involved. By strengthening our multilateral cooperation, we will increase the chances of being able to find more of our loved ones.

Thirdly, we should also broaden our perspective. Resolving war legacies is not limited to MIA issues, it also includes other humanitarian issues with regard to the agent orange dioxin and the unexploded ordinances. Nearly forty years have elapsed since the war ended, we still witness more than 1,500 deaths in Vietnam every year because of bombs and mines left over by the war. Many Vietnamese children born after the war have lost their future when they happened to be in contact with unexploded ordinances. And it is estimated that at the current level of resources, it will take us 100 years more to clear all unexploded ordinances. So we look forward to your stronger support and assistance on those humanitarian works.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank you all for your support to the improved relations between the U.S. and Vietnam over the past years. I am convinced that with the concerted efforts and goodwill of both sides, we will be even more successful in accounting for the MIA of the U.S. and of Vietnam, and in bringing our bilateral relationship to the next level.

Once again, I would like to extend my sympathy to you all for having lost your loved ones, and to those still in the MIA search. We wish that your prayers will be heard, your long journey will reach a happy ending.

Thank you.