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Classification: UNCLASSIFIED Status: [STAT]
 Report Number: FBIS-EAS-91-140 UDC Number:

Headline: Article Views POW Issue, Effect on U.S. Ties

Source Line: BK2007072091 Hong Kong AFP in English 0642 GMT 20 Jul
 91

FULL TEXT OF ARTICLE:

1. [By Jean-Claude Chapon]
2. [Text] Hanoi, July 20 (AFP)-The recent publication of a photograph of three U.S. pilots missing since the Vietnam War threatens to revive animosity over an issue that has blocked the resumption of ties between Hanoi and Washington for more than 15 years.
3. Washington is insisting on a solution to the problem of U.S. servicemen missing in action (MIA) since the Vietnam War as a precondition to the normalisation of bilateral relations, which have been nonexistent since the war ended in 1975.
4. The prisoner of war (POW) issue is re-emerging as Washington's other main prerequisite for normalisation-the settlement of the Cambodian conflict-has made surprising progress in recent weeks with the warring factions reaching agreements that pave the way for peace.
5. The U.S. Government has not confirmed the authenticity of the photograph, which could have been taken in 1990 and shows three men identified by their families as pilots shot down over Indochina in 1966, 1969 and 1970.
6. The Vietnamese Government reaffirmed Thursday that it was not holding any U.S. prisoners of war and offered to cooperate fully over the MIA and POW issues.
7. According to the Pentagon, a total of 2,273 U.S. servicemen disappeared in Indochina, some 1,656 of them in Vietnam, 528 in Laos, 83 in Cambodia and six in Chinese territorial waters.
8. Hanoi has insisted it handed back all U.S. prisoners, but has suggested some deserters may be living in remote, inaccessible regions.
9. Cambodia has made similar declarations, which are credible in that U.S. prisoners would have been unlikely to survive the xenophobic, fanatical Khmer Rouge regime that governed the country from 1975 to early 1979.

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10. In 1982, Laos raised the possibility that some of the servicemen were still being held in zones outside the central government's control.
11. Vietnam said Saturday that one of the servicemen depicted, Colonel John L. Robertson, was dead and that his remains had been handed back. The Pentagon stressed however that experts could not identify the remains.
12. If the photograph proves to be authentic, it would be the first piece of tangible evidence that U.S. servicemen may still be being held Vietnam.
13. Most Western diplomats here were sceptical however.
14. "It doesn't make sense to detain prisoners secretly," one Western diplomat said. "One only holds prisoners deliberately to exchange them later for something else."
15. Another Western diplomat suggested the Vietnamese had kept those prisoners whose physical or mental condition was so bad that they were not presentable.
16. "But in that case it is difficult to imagine that they would have survived this long," he said.
17. The diplomats said that if Vietnam had held onto U.S. prisoners, it should have to pay an exorbitant penalty.
18. "That would cast doubt on Hanoi policy in recent years of normalising relations with the United States to obtain the lifting of the economic embargo imposed by Washington since the end of the war," one diplomat said.
19. "The U.S. reaction would be very negative, but so would that from other Western countries," one diplomat from Western Europe said, adding that this would be a major setback to the country's economic development.
20. Vietnam, currently facing a grave economic crisis as Soviet aid is cut back, is seeking aid from the West and international financial organisations, which has long been blocked by the U.S. economic embargo.
21. The MIA issue must be treated as a humanitarian question, the Vietnamese Government has always maintained, stressing that it is sensitive to the feelings of the servicemen's families.

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22. By contrast, the Vietnamese people appear indifferent. "The French too have their MIAs, we have ours and one isn't making a big issue of them," people often respond when questioned on the subject.

23. The Vietnamese often dismiss MIA investigations as, at best, a waste of time and, at worst, a pretext promoted by anti-Vietnamese defectors in the United States to slow normalisation.

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