

REMARKS BY
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AT THE 25TH CELEBRATION OF THE VIET NAM – U.S. JOINT
MIA OPERATION (1988 – 2013)

(18h30, September 25th 2013, Sheraton, Ha Noi)

*Excellency Ambassador David B. Shear,
Distinguished leaders of Viet Nam and U.S MIA agencies,
Distinguished representatives of Vietnamese and U.S. Ministries and
agencies and local MIA teams,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Friends,*

We gather here today to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Viet Nam – U.S. joint MIA operation. The past 25 years' achievements of this undertaking give us every reason to be proud. Humanitarian operation is among the various areas of cooperation between our two countries. Nevertheless, 25 years ago, it was our first field of cooperation after the war. Many friends and colleagues present here who followed the evolution of the Viet Nam- U.S. relations would share my view that this humanitarian cooperation was the starting point to our new bilateral ties. As the stepping stones for our normalisation of relations in 1995, MIA cooperation has been contributing to the multifaceted cooperation between our two countries.

Friends,

In the spirit of shelving the past and looking forward to the future, with a time-honored tradition of humanity, the Government and people of Viet Nam have been working side by side with the U.S. Government and people in this humanitarian cooperation over the past 25 years. Putting behind all pains and losses, the kind-hearted Vietnamese in all parts of the country have engaged in an endeavour that helped open up a new chapter in the Viet Nam – U.S. relations, one defined by friendship and cooperation.

Let us look at some data related to bilateral humanitarian cooperation over the past 25 years. By the end of the 112th Joint Field Activities that has just finished in mid-September, the two sides have conducted 4141 joint investigation missions (including 42 missions at sea), 685 joint excavation missions (including 8 missions at sea), 53 unilateral investigations covering 818 cases and six unilateral excavations, among which eight were in

restricted areas, 61 tri-lateral investigation operations with Laos and Cambodia. We have also collected and studied 27,035 pieces of MIA-related information and 109 pieces of information related to living Americans which were verified jointly as inaccurate. Viet Nam has returned to the U.S. 945 remains, which has helped the U.S. to identify more than 700 individuals. These are numerical figures, yet they reflect our far-reaching cooperation in this extremely sensitive yet highly humane area. Viet Nam has also showed its goodwill by proactively proposing and coordinating with the U.S. in finding a new operational methods to enhance the effectiveness of operations. Since 2011, both sides have implemented the new Viet Nam Recovery Team (VRT) model in which Viet Nam takes the lead on the site with the assistance of U.S. key personnel and anthropologists. Viet Nam also coordinated to have the Oceanographic Research Ships of the U.S. Navy taking part in MIA activities at sea in the Vietnamese waters in 2009 and 2011. Both sides have also fostered the process of collecting information and persuading the locals to hand over the remains voluntarily and humanely. Besides, we also improved research and MIA-related data collection methods, opened 26/34 MIA cases where the sites were located in restricted areas. Some of the remaining cases shall be opened soon to allow the U.S. side to conduct joint excavation operations, as agreed by high-level leaders of two countries.

Taking stock of our 25 - year journey, we may agree that the scope, level and coordination time of the MIA operations have been unparalleled in all bilateral cooperation areas. Thousands of officials from the Defense Ministry, Public Security Ministry and Foreign Affairs Ministry and localities have participated, directly or indirectly, in these operations. Unilateral and joint teams have carried out information collection and site excavation in nearly 63 provinces and cities across the country, from Son La, Dien Bien and Nghe An in the North, to Quang Binh, Quang Tri, Hue, Quang Nam, Gia Lai, Kon Tum provinces in the Central Region of Viet Nam which were devastating battlefields during war, to the southernmost provinces such as Ca Mau and Kien Giang.

Friends,

The credit for such a strong, effective Viet Nam – U.S. MIA cooperation goes to the relevant Ministries, Agencies and localities of Viet Nam, which have made tireless efforts in ensuring sufficient manpower, professional skills and time while dealing with a very complicated challenge of trying to

explain and persuade the local people and authorities for consent and voluntary assistance. This requires careful internal preparations by officials of Vietnamese Ministries, including Foreign Affairs Ministry, Defense Ministry and Public Security Ministry, and local and provincial officials. On behalf of the leaders of the three Ministries, I would like to take this opportunity to express profound gratitude to the generations of leaders and officials of the three Ministries as well as localities, veterans and especially the people across the country for their tremendous support for the completion of this humane task, although many are still suffering losses from the war and are in search of missing family members. On this occasion, we remember our 16 friends and colleagues sacrificing their lives in the MIA helicopter tragic accident in Quang Binh in April, 2001. May I propose one minute of silence in memory of those our beloved friends and colleagues.

Thank you.

Dear friends,

The goodwill along with active, far-reaching and effective cooperation of the Vietnamese government over the last 25 years in this humanitarian area has been acknowledged and highly appreciated by the U.S. leaders of the Administration and Congress, and of veteran organizations and MIA families. The Vietnamese officials at both central and local governments and the local people involved in the MIA accounting operations expressed cooperation activities with a simple wording: "we leave no stone unturned". They were the ones who actually walked to every forest's corner, climbed mountains, crossed rivers and slept in the jungle.

Having experienced the pains, grieves, and losses of war, the Vietnamese people, more than anyone, understand and empathize with the families of Americans missing in action. 25 years have passed, yet the U.S. MIA accounting efforts in Viet Nam have not been completed. On the Vietnamese side, with 300,000 people missing in the war, hundreds of thousands tons of unexploded ordnances, many areas severely contaminated with dioxin and tens of thousands war victims, it might take the government and people of Viet Nam a hundred years to overcome the consequences of war in our country. The empathy shared between our peoples has been and will continue to be the source of our goodwill, meaningful and effective cooperation. It is also a key factor guaranteeing that our two countries and peoples join hands in dealing with the war consequences.

On this occasion, on behalf of the Vietnamese government, I welcome and appreciate the past support of the U.S. for Viet Nam in handling war consequences, especially related to agent orange, bombs and land mines clearance, and finding missing Vietnamese soldiers. I urge the U.S. to further these efforts, especially in helping war victims and severely damaged localities.

Friends,

Our countries have established comprehensive partnership, an important turning point in the long path from foes to friends. Humanitarian cooperation will continue to be a focus and priority of the two governments. Once again, on behalf of the Vietnamese government and people, I reaffirm Viet Nam's continued goodwill and close, full and effective cooperation with the U.S. in the humanitarian area. This cooperation helps not only mend our peoples' wounds of war, but also bring the Viet Nam-US cooperation to new horizons.

While cheering past achievements, we are well aware of considerable future challenges. As many years have passed since the end of the war, sights might be lost due to weather conditions, nature and local socio-economic developments, and many witnesses might have passed away due to old age. Thus, we need to closely cooperate and improve our operational mode, to accelerate the progress, raise cooperation effectiveness, identify priorities and focuses in accordance with the reality in Viet Nam and ensure physical and human resources for operations. This will help ensure that in a not too different future, we may announce the completion of this task, which is noble and with a heavy responsibility.

I believe that the friendship and close, trusting, effective cooperation we have built over the last 25 years will continue to be the foundation for future achievements of both countries in this humanitarian area, contributing to the development of the Viet Nam-US relations.