

Vietnam reaps bonanza from MIA search

Overcharges U.S., siphons off millions

San Jose Mercury News

HANOI, Vietnam — Vietnam is reaping a multimillion-dollar windfall from a U.S. program to search for the remains of missing American servicemen, a San Jose Mercury News investigation has found.

The Vietnamese government rents U.S. military vehicles to tourists, charges fees far above market prices and siphons wages and other compensation the U.S. government pays for finding remains.

The abuses occur largely because the Department of Defense, which oversees the taxpayer-funded program, willingly pays the inflated prices and does not track how the money is spent. Last year, for example, more than one-third of the \$11.2 million spent on the Vietnam program could not be accounted for.

In the past four years, the U.S. government has spent \$33.6 million on the Vietnam program as part of the most exhaustive and costly attempt by any country to resolve the fate of soldiers who did not return from the war.

Today, with 1,609 Americans still listed as missing in action in Vietnam, the issue dictates U.S. policy toward its former enemy. Although

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the U.S. government has declared all MIAs legally dead, it continues searching for their remains to reach the mission's stated goal of "the fullest possible accounting."

Such an accounting does not extend to the MIA budget, however. In its two-month investigation the Mercury News found a generously funded, loosely monitored U.S. government program that is providing a big payoff to Vietnam's communist government:

■ U.S. government-owned vehicles imported for MIA work and repaired and maintained at U.S. expense — a quarter-million dollars annually — are rented to tourists by a business belonging to Vietnam's Foreign Ministry. The Foreign Ministry oversees Vietnam's role in the MIA program.

■ The U.S. government paid Vietnam an estimated \$1.8 million last year for village laborers — at a rate of \$30-a-day per worker. That daily wage nearly matches the

minimum monthly wage that foreign companies pay unskilled workers here. But many villagers who assisted in excavations for remains said they received less than \$2 a day from Vietnamese officials.

■ The U.S. government paid about \$1.6 million last year primarily as per diem for Vietnamese officials. But U.S. officials have no accounting of work done by the Vietnamese. In addition, Vietnam is paid an extra "organizing fee" that cost taxpayers \$511,500.

■ The U.S. government pays Vietnam an estimated \$500,000 annually to compensate farmers for land damaged during excavations — an average of \$6,500 per site last year. But some farmers said they received as little as \$15 from Vietnamese officials.

■ The U.S. government paid \$3.56 million last year to rent helicopters from a company owned by Vietnam's Defense Ministry. Of

that, \$2.16 million was paid to keep three helicopters on 24-hour standby every day of the year — even though MIA digs are conducted for only six months of the year.

■ The U.S. government pays \$2,000 for "processing" each box of remains returned to the United States — \$70,000 in 1995. No fee is charged in Laos and Cambodia for similar services.

It was not possible to trace which people or agencies in Vietnam's communist government profit from a program that both countries describe as humanitarian.

Defense Department sources said some personnel have complained to superiors about the spending habits. But the Pentagon is under pressure from U.S. MIA families to find remains and officially close cases, and it fears confrontation with Vietnam could shatter cooperation on the issue, those sources said.

The Foreign Ministry said no one from the Vietnam Office for the Search of Missing Persons, the office directing the MIA program, was available to discuss the program and its budget.

But the pattern of financial abuse and lax oversight makes this much clear: Between the time money is wired to Vietnam's Foreign Ministry and reaches its intended recipients, much of it disappears.

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Associated Press

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