

For people to people solidarity with Vietnam

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September 1, 2009 — There has been a lot of media coverage in Australia around the August 31 return of the remains of the last two Australian armed forces personnel – Canberra bomber pilots – who were missing in action in the Vietnam War. But none of the articles put this in the context of the death and damage inflicted on the Vietnamese people by the United States and its ally Australia.

Operating as part of the US Air Force's 35th Tactical Fighter Wing, Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) Canberra bombers flew 6% of the wing's sorties but inflicted 16% of the damage. Overall, 11,963 sorties were flown by the Canberra bombers in Vietnam and 76,389 bombs were dropped. Two Canberra bombers were lost in the process.

Total Australian military casualties in the Vietnam War were 521 killed and 2398 wounded, but the numerous high-altitude bombing raids carried out by Australia's Canberra bombers alone would have inflicted much higher casualties.

The secretary general of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Nong Duc Manh, will be making an official visit to Australia from September 6-9, 2009, at the invitation of Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, to discuss measures to promote the bilateral relations between Vietnam and Australia and to upgrade the relations to that of a "Comprehensive Partnership".

Over the last five years, trade between the two countries has increased at an average of more than 20% a year, reaching A\$8 billion in 2008. This makes Vietnam Australia's fastest growing trading partner in ASEAN. However, the impact of the global economic recession nearly has halved the volume of trade between the two countries in the last year.

Vietnam is Australia's fifth-largest recipient of Australian overseas development assistance, with an estimated \$106 million to be spent in 2009-10. But given Australia's role as an active military ally of the US in its 15-year war against Vietnam – a war that killed 3-4 million Vietnamese and in which the US and its allies dropped more bombs on than it did in World War II – much more aid is morally owed by way of reparations.

While the Australian aid agency AusAID's programs in Vietnam include support for infrastructure, education and training, water and sanitation, as well as poverty reduction amongst ethnic minority groups, Australian governments – Liberal and Labor – seek to advance Australian business interests through its aid program. For example, Australian building contractors have enjoyed large contracts in several infrastructure projects funded by Australian aid to Vietnam.

Education is Australia's third-largest export earner and is Australia's single largest service export to Vietnam, worth \$465 million in 2008, up 63% from the previous year. In 2008 there were 16,000 student enrolments in Australian education institutions, with a further 14,000 students undertaking Australian education and training courses in Vietnam. The great majority of these are paying thousands of dollars a year to study in Australian institutions as the numbers of Australian scholarships provided to Vietnam is very low, recently being increased from just 150 to 175 a year.

The Australian government's trade minister, Simon Crean, outlined other Australian business

interests in Vietnam, in a speech he delivered in Ho Chi Minh City on July 25, 2009 [1]:

"There are opportunities in Vietnam for Australian companies, which are of course leaders in the oil and gas and mining industries, and which also have expertise in alternative energies and clean coal technologies..."

As Vietnam's population grows and income levels rise, we are seeing changing consumption patterns, and the domestic industry is unable to keep pace.

For Australian agribusiness, this is creating new opportunities not only for meat and dairy products, but in livestock, cattle feed, irrigation systems and dairy equipment."

Australian aid is also heavily geared towards promoting neoliberal economic "reforms" in recipient countries. In his visit to Vietnam in July, Crean announced a \$12 million contribution to phase II of the "Beyond WTO" program and additional technical assistance and capacity building to help Vietnam implement its commitments under the Asean-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (AANZFTA). The AANZFTA is the largest free trade agreement Australia has signed.

Under this agreement, Vietnam is committed to lower import tariffs, which will make Australian exports more cost competitive. According to Australia's foreign minister Stephen Smith, Vietnam's substantial opening of its financial sector to foreign participation has been "crucial to boosting bilateral investment" and significant progress of investments by Australian banks, such as the ANZ Bank and the Commonwealth Bank.

As a poor and still war-ravaged country with a population of more than 86 million to feed, the Vietnam government is under massive pressure to make significant economic concessions to global corporations and richer and more powerful countries.

The duty of all supporters of global justice in this country is to pressure our government to base its relations with countries like Vietnam on the basis of people-to-people solidarity and not on the basis of the narrow self-interest of Australian big business.

P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] http://www.trademinister.gov.au/speeches/2009/090725_austcham_vietnam.html