

Houston & Texas News

Truong Nhu Phung, left, and Sanh Van Le — two war veterans who now call Houston home — chose the city's Vietnam-American Memorial to show their opposition to Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's visit.
NICK DE LA TORRE:
CHRONICLE



June 25, 2008, 12:13AM

Houston to see protests as Vietnam's leader pays visit

A visit by their homeland's prime minister has inspired impassioned plans for Vietnamese-American rallies

By LESLIE CASIMIR and JENALIA MORENO
Copyright 2008 Houston Chronicle

Protests of Vietnam leader

Decades after a war raged in the jungles and villages of Vietnam, another battle is brewing, but here on the streets of Houston over the fate of the Southeast Asian country.

And a symbol of this new conflict is coming here this week: Vietnam's prime minister, who for many Vietnamese-Americans represents a government that is among the worst offenders of human rights.

On the eve of Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's controversial visit to Houston, local activists are planning a flurry of rallies and protests around the city to send a clear message to the communist leader.

"We do not welcome him here," said Al Hoang, 46, president of the Vietnamese Community of Houston. "We demand democracy."

Alarmed by the deteriorating human rights record in Vietnam, where political dissidents, religious leaders and journalists are behind bars, Vietnamese-Americans from the city and from as far away as California are scheduled to converge in a parking lot of the Hong Kong City Mall on Bellaire this evening to hold a rally, organizers say. They expect thousands to attend.

On Thursday morning, activists say they will take their impassioned pleas to the Galleria in front of the Westin Oaks Hotel, where Dung is expected to hold a meeting with Texas cotton, energy and airline industry officials.

"What we hope is that we will increase more trade with Vietnam — we provide them with raw materials and they export more goods such as textile products, coffee," said Joe Knierien, president of International Trade Expo and an organizer of the event. "We believe Houston can be the central point of distribution for Vietnamese goods."

Staunch foes of regime

Dung is the first Vietnamese prime minister to visit Houston, Knierien said. And Vietnamese activists say they are anxious to take advantage of his rare presence.

"We care for our people — we are the lucky ones who were able to leave the country to avoid oppression," said Kim Nguyen, 58, a local Realtor and community activist. "There are no basic human rights in Vietnam."

Although the U.S. normalized relations with Vietnam in 1995, many Vietnamese-Americans remain staunchly opposed to the communist regime. Tens of thousands fled to this country as refugees after the U.S.-backed South Vietnamese government fell to northern communist troops in 1975.

Houston has become home to the third-largest concentration of Vietnamese in the United States — an estimated 85,000 — according to U.S. census data. And in recent years, they have watched as government officials in their home country have cracked down on dissidents who dare to criticize the Communist Party.

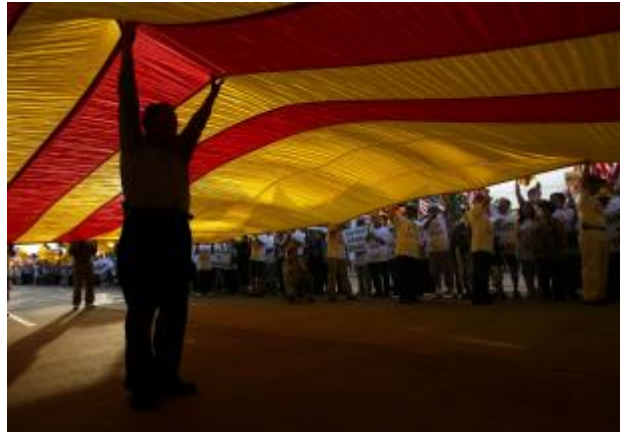
This year saw the arrests of two journalists — Nguyen Viet Chien and Nguyen Van Hai — who reported on a government corruption scandal. Officials there have cited inaccuracies in their reporting.

Last year, the Rev. Nguyen Van Ly was muzzled and arrested after he spoke out against the country's Communist Party at a government trial.

Dung has maintained there are no political prisoners in the country.

In addition, human trafficking — for labor and sex — has skyrocketed in Vietnam. The U.S. State Department has cited the country as a primary source for the trafficking of women and children.

Demonstrators carry a giant South Vietnamese flag Wednesday during a protest against the Vietnamese prime minister's visit. Hundreds of Vietnamese-Americans turned out at the Hong Kong City Mall in southwest Houston for the demonstration. **MAYRA BELTRAN: CHRONICLE**



June 25, 2008, 11:56PM

VIETNAMESE-AMERICAN PROTEST

Visit reopens old wounds

Refugees who fled communist regime rally for their homeland

By JENNIFER LATSON
Copyright 2008 Houston Chronicle

Protests of Vietnam leader

They say the anger that built up during years in prison and concentration camps has largely cooled, but welcoming Vietnam's prime minister to their hometown still burns.

Refugees who sought asylum in the United States after the Vietnam War were among close to 500 people who gathered Wednesday to protest Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's visit to Houston.

Dung is expected to meet in a Galleria hotel today with officials from Texas' cotton, energy and airline industries in the hopes of forging new trade agreements.

On Wednesday, in the parking lot of southwest Houston's Hong Kong City Mall, many who fled the communist regime they say Dung represents waved South Vietnam and American flags and chanted "No freedom! No democracy! No trade!"

"I don't hurt anymore," said 64-year-old Thu Tran Nguyen of Houston, speaking a mix of English and Vietnamese. "But my relatives, my countrymen, need democracy."

Nguyen served as an interpreter for the U.S. Special Forces the Green Berets in South Vietnam from 1965 to 1975. When the Americans left, North Vietnamese soldiers locked him in a concentration camp. He spent his next 10 years doing grueling labor and suffering near-starvation. When he was finally released, in 1985, police still kept him under constant surveillance.

"I had to report to them any time I left my home," he said.

Since he moved to the U.S. in 1993, though, those days are a distant memory. He doesn't hold a grudge against the Vietnamese government or the American troops who left him to fend for himself.

"The war was too long, but it's over," he said. "I am very happy now."

He wants to see the same freedom he enjoys spread to Vietnam.

Protesters argued that the U.S. government isn't helping promote the spread of democracy by doing business with communists.

"We still have family living under this oppressive regime," said 36-year-old Tram Pham, whose father fought for South Vietnam. "If our voices aren't heard in the United States, they'll never see change."

For the U.S.-born children of Vietnamese refugees, the impact of Dung's visit isn't as visceral as it is for their parents.

Nineteen-year-old Theresa Nguyen and her 17-year-old brother, John, waved American flags on Wednesday, while their aunt and uncle carried the yellow-and-red flag of South Vietnam.

The stories of their parents' generation have the quality of family legend. The stories, for example, of how their aunt got lost in the jungle trying to flee the country, and of their uncle's cramped voyage on a 30-foot shrimp boat with 100 other people, including a brother who died on the journey.

For some survivors, the wounds are still raw, and Dung's visit scratches away the scabs of time.

"No Vietnamese refugee wants to see the face of a communist, no matter who he is. Even the prime minister," said one refugee, Quan Tran. "We'd like to kick their faces."

Others say they are torn by a love for their homeland, even after fleeing.

"You cannot live over there," said Andy Nguyen, who fled in 1980 but returned to visit his ailing mother three years ago. "There's no law over there. The law there is by the government, for the government."

Chronicle reporter Mary Vuong contributed to this report.

jennifer.latson@chron.com