

Report from the 15th Australian Political Exchange Council Visit to Vietnam



Australia delegation with Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union

28th July – 2nd August 2011

Delegation Members:

Representatives from the Australian Labor Party

- **Ms Catherine Davis**, *delegation Leader*
 - **Mr Daniel Barbar**, *Advisor to Minister for Infrastructure and Transport*
 - **Ms Janai Tabbanor**, *Advisor to Minister for Defence Materiale*
- Representatives from the Liberal Party of Australia
- **Mr Sam Riordan**, *Advisor to the Deputy Leader of the Opposition*
 - **Mr Sam Duluk**, *President, SA Young Liberals*
- Representative from the Australian Greens
- **Mr Richard Griggs**, *Adviser to Speaker of the ACT Legislative Assembly*



Vietnamese lotus at Hue Mausoleum

Vietnam Visit 2011 Report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 15th APEC delegation to Vietnam Hanoi, Hue and Ho Chi Minh City was hosted by the Ho Chi Minh City Communist Youth Union and facilitated via the International Youth Cooperation Development Centre (CYDECO).

CYDECO is the coordinating body of the National Committee on the Youth of Vietnam, the Vietnam Youth Federation and the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union.

CYDECO exchanges facilitate their goals of continuing to broaden the international friendship and cooperation (along the lines of multi-lateralisation and diversification of relations) to enhance international public relations.

The 15th APEC delegation to Vietnam learned so much more about Australia's relationship with Vietnam, the intricacies and power relationships within the Vietnamese political system, the strong awareness the Vietnamese have about their place in the global community and countries with which they must have key interactions with in order to peacefully and prosperously participate in it. Clearly the part political exchanges play in communicating the aspirations of the Vietnamese people, are critical.

It is no surprise therefore to be informed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that relations between Vietnam and Australia are strong, with Vietnam the 15th largest trading partner of Australia and bilateral trade amounting to US\$4 billion in 2010.

In 2008, Australia and Vietnam signed a Comprehensive Partnership Program agreement (CPP) which has developed remarkably. There is now a regular exchange of high level visits to Vietnam including from the Governor-General, the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Rudd. The CPP Action Plan for the coming period 2010-2013 establishes legal foundations and several mechanisms to ensure and promote development between both nations.

Current Australian Foreign Direct Investment in Vietnam amounts to US\$1.3 billion, over 245 projects. Additionally the Australian Government, through AusAID, provides \$140 million in Overseas Development Aid (ODA) per year to Vietnam. Australia's ODA is targeted in five key areas of priority: infrastructure, trade development, poverty alleviation, education and human capital development, and 'soft infrastructure; such as law reform and political reform.

In addition to investment in physical infrastructure, educational exchange is very important in the bilateral relationship and in the development of the human capital of Vietnam. At present, there are 25,000 Vietnamese students studying at Australian universities, with AusAID providing annual scholarships for 400 students.

Vietnam now pledged to support Australia for a seat at ASEAN and also for a seat on the UN Security Council in recognition of this bilateral relationship.

The Vietnamese political system is based on four main values: A Socialist state based on the rule of law; true political power belongs to the Vietnamese people; the Government acts for the people and is made from the people (based on a centralised democracy); the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) is the State.

With respect to the leadership of the VCP, a congress is convened every 5 years to elect a party leadership and to develop and adopt a new 5 year manifesto (policy platform) – fortunately, the Congress has just met at the time of the Australian visit.

The vision of the VCP is enacted by the National Assembly and the centralised Government, with unitary power of the State, i.e. no distinction between the Legislative, Executive and Judicial powers of the Government and the State. The Legislative arm of the State is a unicameral congress of approximately 1300 people.

The Vietnamese Fatherland Front (VFF) is an umbrella group of pro-Government organisations with close links to the VCP, and is charged with promoting "national solidarity." In practice, as

the VFF is seen as the mass mobilisation of the population, it is viewed as representative of the people, and VFF backing of candidates for elections in the VCP is essential.

With the adoption of the most recent five year manifesto in January 2011 at the 11th party Congress, Vietnam's foreign affairs priorities focus on the nation's international responsibilities and on the development of its comprehensive diplomatic, economic and political integration.

The 15th APEC delegation to Vietnam, throughout its meetings with high level Government ministries, senior and local youth union activists, employer/business leaders and media operators, have had the privilege to more intimately understand a nation closely bound to that of Australia by our shared histories as much as our foreseeable futures.

Vietnam's unique political structure meant that some activities or organizations weren't always immediately translatable to an Australian context but the visit has provided delegates an insight and perhaps an appreciation for processes used in Vietnam toward the maintenance of public support for the political regime.

Generational change is managed differently in the Vietnamese context, however given debates about party reform and political engagement in Australia, this political exchange was thought provoking and certainly valuable.

Above all we experienced the localising effect of realising, through personal stories and cultural experiences, that young people, no matter where in the world, share so much in common and can develop understanding if not real friendship. The hospitality offered to us throughout our trip will leave a lasting, positive memory of Vietnam.

THURSDAY 28th July (Hanoi)

Our first activity was, like many visitors to Vietnam, to **President Ho Chi Minh's Mausoleum and Residence**. On this site is a number of important buildings including the Mausoleum with Ho Chi Minh's preserved body, the Imperial Palace (which Ho Chi Minh refused to live in after the French departed), the two less ostentatious houses that were specially built for him during the Vietnam War and the Museum who chronicled the American War.

Our guide impressed upon us the reverence in which Ho Chi Minh is still held in contemporary Vietnamese society, and the importance of the site to the Vietnamese people.

Meeting with Secretariat of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union

Our first meeting was one of the biggest that we attended in Vietnam, with a large number of representatives from the Communist Youth Union, including their Secretary Ms Nguyen Thi Ha and a journalist and photographer from the Unions Newspaper, Pioneer.

Included in the group were members of Central Committee of the Party, which plays a key role in determining the policies and priorities of the Party.

This was a concept which was very much at odds with the Delegation's understanding of Youth Unions, or Youth parties. Whereas in Australia these are generally the youth wings of Political Parties, in Vietnam the Communist Youth Union is a professional part of the Party's infrastructure and people occupying leadership roles are remunerated and go on to be given senior roles in Government.

The Youth Union represents Vietnam's 23 million youth, who are all encouraged to follow the teachings and philosophy of Ho Chi Minh and be active in the Party. Engaging young people into the Communist philosophy of the nation is seen as vital to Vietnam's stability and peace.

During the meeting we gained a strong understanding of broad role of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union. As well as recruitment to the Party, the Union very much sees its role as supporting young people in education, training and job opportunities.

When asked about the aspirations and dreams of young Vietnamese, the message was clear – that young Vietnamese dreamt of continued peace and prosperity for their country, as well as

the opportunities to pursue their own personal aspirations. In this sense, this is not unlike the Australian idea of a “fair go”.

There was also overlap on other issues, like Climate Change. Like in Australia, there is a greater awareness of the issue of Climate Change than in older generations, and the Vietnamese Youth Union was working with the Department of Environment to raise awareness of this issue.

The Youth Union also covers the issue of Climate Change extensively in its newspaper, which has one of the biggest readerships in Vietnam.

Social Media and its use was also a common theme between the two delegations, with our members talking about its importance in political campaigning in Australia, and the Vietnamese delegation talking about the growth of using social media in its activities.

Following the meeting the Ho Chi Minh Youth Union hosted a lunch at a nearby restaurant.

Courtesy call to Leaders of Hanoi City

The Leaders of Hanoi City, Vice Chairman of the Hanoi People’s Committee, Ms Nguyen Thi Bich Ngoc welcomed us to Hanoi City with a very formal, albeit brief meeting due to much political activity following the National Congress.

There was little opportunity for questions at this meeting, however the Leaders of the City were pleased to hear of our earlier visit to the Mausoleum and wished us well for the remainder of our trip. TV media was also in attendance and the presentation of gifts was aired that night.

Meeting with Ministry of Science and Technology

This was a small meeting as the Ministry was moving offices that day. Fortunately, we were able to meet with Dr Mai Ha, Director General of International Co-operation for the department.

Dr Ha gave us an extensive overview of the department and the work that it does, outlining seven main priorities – Hygiene and Sanitation, Biotechnology, New Materials, Energy, Oceanography, Disaster and Climate Change Adaptation, and Space Technology.

The ministry has extensive links with research institutions, including over 400 universities, 4 national academies of Science and 32 other research institutes which are either supporting scientists or training Vietnam’s next generation of researchers.

In terms of Vietnam’s concerns around Climate Change, these were around three main issues – that of food security (the food bowl of the Mekong being directly under threat by Climate Change), energy security and sustainable development.

We were informed that Vietnam is the 5th most impacted nation on Climate Change, and that because of this a lot of the Department’s International Division’s work was on cooperation and support of this issue.

A number of issues were canvassed during the meeting, including Vietnam’s emphasise on technology and innovations, the role of the private sector and foreign direct investment. In particular, Dr Ha outlined the Ministry’s association with the Rockefeller Foundation to increase awareness of Climate Change in children.

After our day of meetings our Vietnamese host Mr Pham Tuan Son took us **to dinner at a Hot Pot restaurant** where what it seems all types of animal meat are cooked in a broth with vegetables. Some of the group enjoyed trying meat that is perhaps not as commonly available in Australia.

After dinner we saw a **Water Puppet show**, which, along with the Mausoleum and Residence visits, are perhaps the most popular cultural activities for international visitors to Hanoi.

FRIDAY 29th July (Hanoi)

Meeting with Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The Delegation was first received and welcomed at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by Mr. Vuong Hai Nam, Director General of the South East Asia and Pacific unit within the Ministry.

The meeting discussed the main issues in the Asia-Pacific region affecting Vietnam, and solutions to produce a better region. The Delegation was advised that in the current economic and geo-political environment, economic mechanisms, in particular the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), continued to play the most beneficial roles in ensuring that Vietnam is able to develop and provide better living standards for its population.

With regard to the political debate in the region, the significant issue at the forefront of Vietnamese Foreign Affairs policy focus is seeking the correct balance in the country's relationships with the superpowers of the region, in particular China, Japan, Russia and the United States.

Additionally, of significant interest to Vietnam is the current situation involving the Mekong River, (home to Vietnam's most fertile soils producing 60 percent of the country's rice) and their neighbours further north seeking to dam the river which will severely affect Vietnam.

Vietnam seeks to foster positive relationships and work cooperatively with its neighbours and other international players to find a workable solution to this issue, with a signed agreement viewed as the most favourable outcome, although the process of achieving such an agreement is proving difficult.

A second meeting was held with a delegation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that consisted of:

- Deputy Director-General of the America unit
- Head of the Ministry's International Organisation
- Representative of the North-East Asia Department
- Assistant Director-General of the Ministry's Policy Planning Department
- Representative of the National Border Committee
- Officer from the Ministry's Australian Desk



Australian delegation with officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The delegations engaged in meaningful discussion on many topics, as discussed earlier in the Executive Summary, and set up an open atmosphere where the dialogue was incredibly informative and beneficial to all Australian delegates.

- **Relations with Global Superpowers**

As advised by officials, the normalisation of relations with the United States (as of 1995) has developed as a result of national interests, mostly through economic reforms and increasing trade with the United States. At a macro level, both nations have established constructive and multi-party relationships, with a commitment to a continued contribution to peace and stability in the region and around the world.

Vietnam has been involved in several high-level visits, which must maintain momentum in order to ensure peaceful and economically significant outcomes to all parties involved. In 2010 there was significant cooperation between Australia, Vietnam and the United States, (particularly high-level trilateral talks between defence Ministers) with Vietnam as the Chair of ASEAN.

Vietnamese officials are most pleased to see increasing levels of foreign education by Vietnamese students in Australia and the United States, with the return of developed human capital viewed as the key to driving new foreign relationships in the future.

The development of tourism as a sustainable industry is an objective of the current leadership regime. In the first 6 months of 2011, US tourists to Vietnam totalled 240,000.

A major issue between Vietnam and the United States is the continuing health and environmental impacts of the use of Agent Orange during the war. The US Congress approved US\$15 million in 2010 for environmental cleanup projects, but Vietnam believes that the US must do more, especially with respect to compensation and rehabilitation of Vietnamese people that are now living with the physical and health consequences of use of Agent Orange.

The United States assists in an indirect manner, through projects to clean-up the physical environment, though it is interesting to note that assistance for victims and victim support is still totally funded by the Vietnamese Government.

Vietnam of course balances its interactions with 'superpowers' United States as well as China.

A major issue with China is the continued ownership dispute over the islands of the Eastern Sea. The Eastern Sea is the navigational route for one-third of Vietnam's exports. Additionally, half of the world's merchant fleet, by tonnage, will travel through the Eastern Sea every year. This is therefore a complex issue as for some islands, bilateral ownership claimants must sit down and work towards a peaceful solution themselves. For other islands, with multilateral claimants, different political and communicative mechanisms are required to achieve a solution.

A lacking solution to disputes in the Eastern Sea continues to prevent the free navigation of trade. Vietnam is now in the process of establishing an agreement with China to find an intermediate solution and calls for participation from other international players in the region for a peaceful and workable solution.

Further, issues with China exist with recent moves at the World Trade Organisation and the dumping of Chinese goods in Vietnam's market to destroy local production.

Vietnam maintains that free trade is paramount to ensure the economic development of a nation, however strongly supports the argument that trade must occur without detriment to the Vietnamese people.

- **Human Rights**

Officials have acknowledged that the protection and promotion of human rights has been at the forefront of Vietnamese policy decision-making since the 1945 declaration of independence. While acknowledging that human rights are universal, the regime confesses that their implementation and safeguards should take into account a nation's cultural and individual circumstances.

Vietnam is engaged in annual human rights dialogues with 5 international partners, and their discussions with Australia are frank, open and constructive, with the most recent dialogue held in Canberra in 2010.

Vietnam has prioritised stronger human rights for the disabled and for minorities in their population, and is in receipt of three special envoys on the disabled, poverty reduction and minorities to help them achieve this.

As a signatory to the Millennium Development Goals, Vietnam has achieved its MDG goal on poverty reduction 15 years ahead of schedule. In 1992, 60 percent of the population lived in poverty. With economic and other associated reforms, that figure currently stands at 12 percent as of 2010.

After a discussion between the delegations on the subject of same-sex law reforms globally, Vietnamese officials acknowledge that being a traditionally conservative society same-sex reform is a new phenomenon in Vietnam, with the culture yet to change. Officials acknowledge that it will take significant time and energy to achieve a formal debate on the issue in the country.

With regard to political freedom, officials believe that political reform is entirely possible with only the VCP as a legally allowed political party in Vietnam. Officials maintain that the concept of democracy is overarching in the current political system with the leadership elected within the National Assembly from the grassroots up.

The interpretation of political freedom had its difficulties from an Australian perspective.

Meeting with Vietnam Chamber of Commerce & Industry

The Delegation was received by Mr Hoang Van Dung, the First Vice-President of the VCCI.

The VCCI represents the private sector of Vietnam with three main objectives: lobby for business interests with regard to legislation and the economic environment; trade promotion; and, representing employers when it comes to the issue of labour.

The VCCI employs 1,000 staff around Vietnam to support business and today represents over 500,000 private companies. Communication is maintained with its members through the publication of business-specific newspapers, of which the Chamber owns five.

The private sector now represents 52 percent of export income, 32 percent of industrial output and has a market capitalisation of US\$200 billion.

With its admittance to the World Trade Organisation in 2007, Vietnam understands its requirement to increase competition in the economy, particularly in banking. Further, deregulating the banking industry and allowing international competition (such as the ANZ) has been made easier due to the lack of credit available to Vietnam.

The VCCI admits that competition is a good thing for Vietnam. The country now has 12,000 foreign companies operating within its borders, and is welcome as Vietnam has: resources; human capital; a strategic regional position; and, Government incentives to foreign companies to establish a base in Vietnam.

Additionally, there are significant economic benefits from the country's free trade agreement with Japan and the current Trans Pacific Partnership economic agreements. Despite anti-dumping measures imposed on catfish exports by the United States, Vietnam has overcome America's anti-free trade stance by finding new markets for one of their most significant aqua cultural exports in Europe, Russia and Japan. The delegation notes that since the imposition of anti-dumping measures by the United States, the Vietnamese catfish industry has doubled its output.

With the efficient deployment of human capital within the economy, Vietnam has established a Sustainable Development Alliance in response to international pressure to increase Vietnamese labour standards and environmental performance. This will assist in the development of some form of Occupational Health and Safety standards for workers.

Further, the VCCI is seeking to enhance its action on climate change to improve the environment but also to increase production efficiencies and outputs from resources. The Chamber is currently engaged in trying to protect Vietnamese industry and the environment from the dumping of second-rate technologies from China and Japan, which is detrimental to the local natural environment.

Although access to the Vietnamese economy is better today than it was twenty-five years ago, there are still significant difficulties with bureaucracy, government red tape, and a lack of infrastructure, particularly: electricity generation, access and quality of port and rail infrastructure, and, labour shortages and industrial action due to low wages and high inflation.

VCCI meets with Government on an annual basis to advise on efficiency that can be achieved. On average the Chamber seeks to reduce regulations by 50 per annum. Also, every by-law or regulation requires input from the VCCI. National Assembly legislative representatives from the business sector now have 41 Deputies – an increase from the 25 before the National Assembly elections earlier in 2011.

Additionally, the Chamber also seeks to lift the quality of Vocational Education and Training Programs provided by the Government. While acknowledging that skill development is important, the Chamber believes that current education programs and curricula are insufficient to promote an economically flexible and skilled workforce.

With regard to unemployment, there are no official figures available, but 17 percent of the population are employed in agriculture, and there are approximately 1.5 million new entrants to the workforce each year.

In terms of infrastructure, the Chamber believes that there is significant potential to invest in Vietnam, but that significant reforms and capital is required to foster such an environment. The Chamber estimates that there are thousands of kilometres of roads that require development, 3000 bridges need to be built to foster the efficient transport of people and goods, and approximately US\$150 billion is required to sufficiently upgrade and develop electricity generation. In recent activity, the Government was trialling the mechanics of Public Private Partnerships, by allowing the construction of a toll road and other transport options using such a method.

Internationally the VCCI has a professional and working relationship with the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and both advocate and encourage trade between both countries.

The VCCI has established and promotes numerous Vietnamese associations abroad amongst expats to encourage the promotion of Vietnam as a place to invest in, conduct trade and business and also to promote tourism. Additionally, networks are established to allow expats to remit financial and other economic resources for the economic development and support of the Vietnamese economy and its people.

Meeting at Tien Phong Newspaper

Instead of a meeting with the Ministry of Justice (not possible because of Party decisions taking place) we visited the Tien Phong Newspaper Editor and the World News Director of International Department, being one of many hundreds of newspapers in Vietnam. The discussions around the future of print newspapers, the power of online communication and the diversity of media content in Vietnam were nonetheless worthwhile.

SATURDAY 30th July (Hanoi and Thua Thien Hue Province)

Before departing Hanoi our delegation host Mr Son, facilitated a visit to the **Temple of Literature** explaining the history of the university, the reverence for education and knowledge that the Vietnamese people possess and the ongoing tradition of wishing for good examination luck (by families of students) by visiting the 'turtle' headstones of previous doctorate students and rubbing the concrete heads.

Meeting with Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union of Thua Then Hue Province (TTHP)

Following our travel from Hanoi to Thua Then Hue Province (TTHP) we arrived at the offices of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union of Thua Then Hue Province (TTHP). We were greeted with a welcoming banner in our honour and provided with some history of Hue City which was the former imperial capital of Vietnam.

Within the Youth Union of Thua Then Hue Province there are 40 individuals holding leadership role and they manage 150 staff who are responsible for developing the social & economic plan for youth of the area (16 – 40yrs). Given the numbers and breadth of the community involved with the Youth Union's activities, staff are aware of how important their role in educating and engaging young people is.

The Youth Union of Thua Then Hue Province reports activities directly to the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union and they implement the general goals and plans for the HCMCYU.

Through a series of questions the two parties discussed the motivations of the Vietnamese youth to be friends to youth all over the world, and the passion the Youth of Hue have to achieve independence, freedom & Socialism. To the youth of Hue, this means involvement themselves with educational, social and poverty-reducing activities that help disadvantaged youth in the provincial areas surrounding Hue. An environmental volunteer group has been established to combat climate change/battle ongoing environmental issues, as have activities relating to HIV/AIDS awareness been a key role facilitated by the youth union.

Many of the social activities organised by the Hue Youth Union are also used as recruitment opportunities. Their several newspapers act as formal information/propaganda of the HCMCYU within Hue and the union has nominated several delegates from Western Province to represent them at the 2011 Party Congress.

The Australian delegation was interested that they have 'role of inspector' – the inspector's role is to ensure that rules and regulations of the youth union are followed and implemented.

The formal meeting ended with an exchange of gifts and a dinner for our delegation was hosted by Thua Thien Hue Provincial Youth Union and Mr Tran Phung, President of the Committee of Vietnam Fatherland Front Thua Thien Hue Province. Despite the weather preventing us from the **Hue River "Royal music" dinner cruise** that had been planned we were nonetheless treated to many local Hue provincial dishes, mostly seafood based, at a notable restaurant and enjoyed the many kind words, followed by toasts in our honour.

Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union of Thua Then Hue Province members with their welcome banner

SUNDAY 31st July
(Thua Thien Hue Province)



Beginning the day with a **cultural visit to the Hue Palace and Mausoleum** provided the delegation a chance to truly step back in time to a world of opulent palatial grounds, concubines and eunuchs, tragic ends to the reign of kings and monuments erected to restore positive legacies to the people of Vietnam.

Thua Thien Hue Provincial Youth Development Centre

Upon returning to our newfound friends from the Thua Thien Hue Provincial Youth Union, we jointly visited their Centre for Children & Youth Activities.

The centre, offering over 40 different social, sporting, music and cultural activities, aims to meet the needs of the youth of the Hue community and to mobilise children outside of school hours to improve their life skills.

The Centre has 32 staff, 15 teachers & 40+ Co-ordinators who arrange activities for the youth of Hue with its funding coming from the provincial and national government.

The Centre is well recognised and respected amongst the community and is a place where gifted students are encouraged and extended, with the same commitment that it also has for the provision of support to children who suffer from mental or physical disabilities.

The Australian delegation members became very interested to hear about the community development activities, (particularly about environmental issues like deforestation and animal rights, but also informing the community about HIV AIDS, blood donation and assisting the disadvantaged.) We were told of a cycling tour from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City that the youth can participating in, talking to the Vietnamese people about these critical social issues.

We finished the formal part of the day with a Hue City tour and enjoyed a dinner overlooking the Hue River.



MONDAY 1st August (Ho Chi Minh City)

The delegation travelled throughout the morning to Ho Chi Minh City.

Meeting with the Ho Chi Minh City Communist Youth Union

The Ho Chi Minh City Communist Youth Union presented a comprehensive *powerpoint* presentation to us (in English) so we could follow the issues better. Despite some time constraints to ensure we were not late to our meeting with the People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City, we were given much information.

The Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union celebrated its 80th anniversary in March. The Union represents the legal rights of the youth of Ho Chi Minh City and has 690,000 members. Member

organisations include the Vietnamese Youth Federation, the Student Association and Ho Chi Minh Pioneers Organisation.

The Union runs a large number of activities and programs (travelling to thirteen cities as well as occasional trips to Cambodia and Laos) including: Business Start Up Centre to assist young people entering business, Youth Outdoor Activities program to keep young people healthy and active, the Youth Advertising Company to teach about the advertising industry, scholarships for disadvantaged students, commending ceremonies for young police officers, The Red Flamboyant campaign to promote the needs of the environment and the spread information around the region.

Delegates asked questions relating to the Business Start Up Centre and how it worked. Union representatives said there were four strategies:

1. Financial advice and information
2. Direct financial support
3. Consultancy services
4. Training

Delegates also asked about the Red Flamboyant campaign and what activities it undertook. Union representatives advised that particular activities included: tree planting, erosion reduction activities in canals, recycle promotion and emergency conservation advice. The Union also participates in Earth Hour.

Meeting with the Leaders of Ho Chi Minh City

Vice Chairman of the People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), Mr Hua Ngoc Thuan welcomed our APEC delegation to their city which is 95,000 square kilometres and has a population of 7,130,000. However, with migrants from neighbouring cities the total population approaches 10 million.

The HCMC Leaders have developed 22 specific targets across economic, social and environmental areas. Examples of the targets include eliminating poverty by 2015. Poverty was defined as people earning less than 12 million dong per year.

Population was identified as a barrier to meeting many of these targets. For this reason one of the targets is to stabilise population at 10 million. The strategies in place to achieve population stabilisation are two pronged. Firstly the Leaders are aiming to restructure the economy to provide higher standards of living. Secondly, the Leaders are planning to relocate people over the border to small cities where population growth is desired.

Delegates asked about how the Government reported progress against the 22 targets. The Leaders advised that the Statistics Office within Government compiled reports on progress and provided these reports to 59 representatives on the people's council.

We enjoyed **traditional Ho Chi Minh food** and also a special performance of traditional Vietnamese music and dancing at the Rex Hotel hosted by Ho Chi Minh City Youth Union. After dinner we had a guided tour of the night markets and were given advice on appropriate bartering methods.



TUESDAY 9th – Ho Chi Minh City

Meeting with Vietnam Women's Union of Ho Chi Minh City

The delegation was warmly welcomed by Ms Nguyen Thi Ngoc Hanh, Vice President of the Vietnam Women's Union of Ho Chi Minh City and representatives from the Standing Committee for Women.

The Women's Union was established in its current form in 1976 having previously existed under the name Women's Revolutionary Association. The Union aims to improve education and skill levels for women, develop social policy on gender equity issues, generate employment opportunities and support women taking care of their families.

Union representatives informed delegate of the difficulties confronting female participation in the political system. Having previously campaigned for women to be given priority status in the Party, the Union has modified its calls to that of equal treatment.

According to the Union, female participation in civic and political institutions in Vietnam was limited because a lack of formal education, when compared to men. Women face the difficult task of balancing professional responsibilities and ambitions with their traditional duties at home.

This is changing for the better however. The ratio of men to women in the education system for example, has improved markedly in recent years with women now making up nearly half of all PhD university students.

The Union's political and social aims are progressed through its newspaper, which is read by over 140,000 people. With an estimated 200,000 people visiting the newspaper's website each day, it is one of Vietnam's most well-read news publications.

The newspaper plays a key role for example in raising awareness of maternal health issues, for example a town hall event was held the previous evening for 1,000 women to hear a discussion on pregnancy-related issues. Environmental protection and food safety is also promoted.

Union representatives spoke candidly about the challenges facing young women in Vietnam, particularly the pressures caused by mainstream media. The Union is seeking to offset this through such initiatives as organising open-door activities for young girls where they can socialise in a non-threatening environment.

In closing the discussion, the Union highlighted that to mark the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day they ran campaigns through the newspaper, an overseas exchange program with women in other countries and presented awards to recognise women's professional excellence in various fields.

Tour of Cu Chi Tunnels

The after visit of the Cu Chi Tunnels, situated a short distance from Ho Chi Minh City was certainly a highlight for many. The tunnels are an immense network of underground tunnels used by the Viet Cong during the Vietnam War. Several military campaigns were fought in the area.



Cu Ci Tunnels

Members of the delegation witnessed the difficult conditions that faced men and women of both sides during that period. It was a reminder of the importance of building understanding, trust and friendship between nations and a fitting conclusion to our political exchange visit.