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In Visit, Clinton Criticizes Vietnam on Rights



By [MARK LANDLER](#)

HANOI, Vietnam — Secretary of State [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) chided [Vietnam](#) on Thursday for intolerance of dissent and infringement of Internet freedom, even as she celebrated its 15 years of normalized relations with the United States.

Mrs. Clinton said she raised the issues of jailed democracy activists, attacks on religious groups and curbs on social-networking Web sites during a meeting with Vietnam’s deputy prime minister, [Pham Gia Khiem](#).

The United States will prod Vietnam’s government “to pursue reforms and protect basic rights and freedoms,” she [said at a news conference](#), as Mr. Khiem stood expressionless beside her.

“Vietnam, with its extraordinary, dynamic population, is on the path to becoming a great nation, with an unlimited potential,” she added. “That is among the reasons we expressed concern.”

Mr. Khiem replied that human rights policies were rooted in unique cultural and historical circumstances. He cited what he said was [President Obama](#)’s observation that countries should be allowed to choose their own paths and that human rights should not be imposed from outside.

The timing of Mrs. Clinton’s remarks here, at the start of a two-day stop that includes an Asian regional security meeting, suggested that she wanted to make her point and move on. She emphasized that the United States would increase cooperation on trade and investment, and would do more to help people suffering lingering effects from Agent Orange, a chemical spray the American military used as a defoliant during the Vietnam War.

Still, Mrs. Clinton’s criticism offered a vivid contrast to her visits to China as secretary of state, where she has avoided publicly raising human rights issues with Chinese officials. It came on the same day that Defense Secretary [Robert M. Gates](#) was announcing in Jakarta that the United States would resume military contacts with an elite Indonesian military unit long criticized for abuses, arguing that it had reformed.

These divergent moves reflect the uneven landscape the Obama administration confronts in the region, including not only rising China and recalcitrant North Korea, but also an unreconstructed military dictatorship in Myanmar and a reformed military state in Indonesia — and a Communist government in Vietnam that is showing signs of retreating from its reformist path.

Though human rights conditions are indisputably better in Vietnam now than at the end of the war, analysts say there has been backsliding in recent years, which may reflect the growing influence of conservative political elements. In January, the government [convicted three prominent democracy activists](#) under a strict national security law.

Last week, 19 members of Congress [sent Mrs. Clinton a letter](#), urging her to press Vietnam about these cases and censorship of Web sites like [Facebook](#). The lawmakers said Vietnam had “escalated its aggression towards activists and taken concerted steps to silence online speech.”

Mrs. Clinton’s husband, former President [Bill Clinton](#), oversaw [the normalization of ties](#) between the United States and Vietnam in 1995, and Mrs. Clinton spoke warmly of the memories that the country evoked. Her [last visit](#) was as first lady in November 2000, in the waning days of the Clinton presidency but in the flush of her own recent election as senator from New York.

Thongs welcomed Mr. Clinton, the first sitting American president to visit Vietnam. Mrs. Clinton and their daughter, Chelsea, delighted farmers in a dusty village outside

Hanoi when they put on conical hats to ward off the tropical sun. A Vietnamese artist portrayed that moment in a large mosaic etched with rubies, sapphires, and quartz, which a Vietnamese gem and jewelry company presented to Mrs. Clinton. Mr. Khiem also gave her a white tablecloth for Ms. Clinton, who will be married on July 31.

At a lunch with Vietnamese and American businesspeople, she poked fun at her zeal for the role of mother of the bride, questioning the “common sense” of juggling wedding planning with a grueling week that has taken her from a war zone in Afghanistan to the demilitarized zone in South Korea.

But Mrs. Clinton also spoke of how the United States and Vietnam had overcome the bitterness of war, and then the “profound differences” that divide a Communist state from a democracy.

“The United States will continue to urge Vietnam to strengthen its commitment to human rights and give its people a greater say over the direction of their lives,” she said. “But our relationship is not fixed upon our differences. We have learned to see each other not as former enemies, but as friends.”