

# **AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL EXCHANGE COUNCIL**

## **VISIT TO VIETNAM**

**25 March to 31 March 2012**

## **DELEGATION VISIT REPORT**

**Mr Alan Tudge MP (Lib, Vic, Delegation Leader)**

**Ms Dai Le (Lib, NSW)**

**Mr Sel Sanli (ALP, Vic)**

**Ms Nadia Clancy (ALP, SA/ACT)**

**Mr Duncan Maclaine (Lib, Qld)**

**Mr David Latham (ALP, NSW)**



## **Executive Summary**

We were the 16<sup>th</sup> Australian delegation to Vietnam under the auspices of the Australian Political Exchange Council. It was a well organised, productive and informative visit.

All the delegates returned with a much deeper appreciation and understanding of the society and governance of Vietnam, its history, the issues that Vietnam currently faces, and the importance of the Australian/Vietnam relationship and how we might strengthen it.

The program commenced in Hanoi (the capital of Vietnam). We spent two days there and met with the city and government leaders, as well as leaders from the Education Ministry and Foreign Affairs Ministry. We also had the opportunity to visit politically important (to the Vietnamese government) sites including Ho Chi Minh's Mausoleum and the Hanoi Temple of Literature.

On Wednesday 28 March 2012, we travelled to Da Nang where we met with the Vice-Secretary of Communist Party of Da Nang as well as the Youth Union. We travelled to the ancient town of Hoi An in the evening.

The last two/three days were spent in the commercial capital, Ho Chi Minh City, in the south of Vietnam. Again, we met with government leaders as well as met with leaders with responsibility for women's affairs, trade relationships, tourism, and veterans. On the final day, many of the delegates visited the Cu Chi Tunnels, which were built and used during the Vietnam War.

We are grateful for the support provided by the Vietnam International Youth Cooperation Development Center for organising the program and assisting with translations in many of the meetings.

Our visit was also enhanced by the participation of Ms Dai Le as a delegate. Ms Le was born in Vietnam and came to Australia as a refugee with her family in the 1970s. She brought a unique perspective to the visit which she was able to share to the benefit of the other delegates.

### **Key themes and Observations**

#### **1. A country in transition: economically ....**

Vietnam is a country in transition. It is a communist country, but is moving rapidly towards a market-based economy. It was frequently referred to as a "managed market economy".

We discovered that most of the large corporations are still state-owned, including for example, most of the large tourist infrastructure. It was telling that the President of the Young Entrepreneurs Association of Vietnam remarked that the most important thing for business success is having a good relationship with Government.

However, there are now some moves towards privatisation and there is a demand for foreign investment. Some Australian companies already have a sizeable and visible presence in Vietnam including ANZ Bank and Jetstar.

#### **.... and (maybe) politically**

There are some indications of emerging political pluralism in Vietnam, although it is not occurring rapidly. The country is still a single-party state and governed along traditional Leninist lines. The overlap between the Communist Party and the Government is considerable at all levels.

There were two things that gave small indications that political liberalism is slowly occurring. The first is that it appears that nearly everyone in the large cities has iPhones and ready access to free

wireless internet. As the Vice-Chairman of the National Assembly said: “what happens in the world brings pressure on us”. And he drew our attention to a protest outside the building.

Second, one of the leaders we met indicated that the National Assembly is gaining in strength and legitimacy and that it was getting very close to social democracy. Liberalism, he said, is one of the “common values of mankind”.

## **2. Strong Australian-Vietnam relationship**

The relationship between Australia and Vietnam has been developing significantly since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1973. There is now \$6.2 billion in trade between the two countries; there are strong people-to-people links, particularly in education (see below); and there is political and security cooperation. Vietnam is also a major aid recipient from Australia. As Australian delegates, we were very warmly welcomed at every meeting.

There were suggestions that the relationship could be enhanced in a number of ways, for example (a) making better use of the expat community in Australia; (b) further Australian foreign investment particularly in large infrastructure projects if they are managed on a commercial basis; and (c) further people-to-people linkages.

## **3. The importance of education**

It was notable that at almost every meeting, Australia’s tertiary education system was raised. Further, many of the leaders we met had been educated in Australia. Our tertiary education system is clearly important in the development of Vietnam’s people. It is also important for Australia, not only from an income perspective, but equally importantly, because it greatly enhances the relationship between the two nations. There are over 23,000 Vietnamese students studying in Australia and further 10,000 students undertaking Australian courses in Vietnam. The Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) was frequently mentioned as a well-respected institution operating in Vietnam. It was the first foreign university operating in Vietnam.

## **4. A growing economy, but significant challenges**

The Vietnamese economy has been growing rapidly as a result of the moves towards economic liberalism (averaging 9% per annum), although its growth has slowed in the last couple of years. Last year’s growth was only 5.8%, below its official target.

It is still a poor country with GDP per capita of about \$1,400 and 20% of people living below the poverty line.

One of its biggest economic challenges presently is inflation which is running at over 17%. There was no clear strategy presented to the delegates as to how to tackle this. There have also been concerns expressed about the efficiency of the public investments (which were 17% of GDP in 2009) and whether they were contributing to economic growth.

Members of the delegation were split as to whether to be optimistic or pessimistic about Vietnam’s economic future.

## **Monday, 26 March 2012 - Hanoi**

### **Hanoi Temple of Literature**

We started our trip with a visit to the Hanoi Temple of Literature where we could not only enjoy some of the sights, sounds and smells of Vietnam, but also get a look into its history.

Behind the ornate temple sat Vietnam's first university that was in operation from the 11<sup>th</sup> century until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Students studied Confucianism and morality subjects, graduating with a Doctorate of Philosophy. The delegation learnt much about the history of education in Vietnam through the relatively brief, but detailed tour.

### **Hochiminh Communist Youth Union**

Our meeting with the Hochiminh Communist Youth Union (HCYU) was led by Secretary Ms Ha. It was interesting to hear that she learnt a lot when she travelled to Australia in 2011.

There are approximately 22 million youth aged between 16-30 in Vietnam, making up 26% of the population and 40% of the workforce. By identifying these figures, Ms Ha was emphasising the importance of young people to Vietnam and therefore the importance of their union.

The Union assists the youth in a number of ways, with the main purpose being employment services. HCYU help young people enter the workforce through:

- Seeking jobs for more than 160,000 youths a year;
- Advising youth on jobs that are available;
- Providing job introduction courses;
- Training youth in areas including commercial services, agriculture and more recently information technology; and
- Assisting young people to work out what direction they want to go in with their career.

Ms Ha suggested that the reason for this strong focus on employment is that it has been identified as the biggest area of concern for young people in Vietnam. To ensure its programs are working efficiently, the HCYU cooperates with the Department of Education and Training.

It was also interesting to note that when Vietnamese students return from study in Australia, they are often given senior positions in state agencies and departments. It was good to hear that Australia's higher education system is so highly respected and regarded by the Vietnamese.

Ms Ha explained that beyond employment services for Vietnam's youth, the Union focuses on ensuring the nation's defence and supporting economic and social development.

Youth are invited to join the HCYU if they are seen to qualify. It is common for people in the HCYU to go on and become prominent members and leaders of the Communist Party. While the HCYU has a huge membership base, Ms Ha said that it does have a problem mobilising the youth in industrial areas so this is an area they are working on.

### **Ministry of Foreign Affairs**

*Mr Vinh*

The delegation had a brief meeting with Vice Minister Mr Vinh, who is the equivalent of the Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs in Australia. He spoke positively of our relationship and said he looks forward to celebrating our 40-year anniversary of diplomatic relations next year.

Mr Vinh was confident about the future of our region and wants major powers to work together in a way that helps countries achieve goals they set for themselves, rather than imposing their own goals on Vietnam. This comment is important to consider when determining the way in which our nation interacts with theirs and others in the region. In conjunction with this, he was also keen for us to take home the message that regional processes are important and shouldn't be ignored. He said agreements need to be effectively implemented, but that doesn't always happen at present.

One line from Mr Vinh that resonated with the delegation was 'Australia has the values of a western country, but its heart is in the Asia-Pacific.'

#### *Ambassador Nguyen Duy Hung*

Our meeting with Mr Vinh was followed with a meeting with Ambassador Hung and a number of young people from the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam. The Academy consults with and provides research for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, while also training people with the necessary skills to work in the Department, and possibly an embassy/consulate in the future.

There are a number of similarities between the process for getting a place with the Academy and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade graduate program in Australia.

It was particularly interesting to hear Ambassador Hung speak of the current political system and his openness to reform in the Government sector, saying that while he believed that the one party system is good for the country's development now, they don't know what changes may occur in the future.

#### **Ministry of Education and Training**

Our last meeting for the day was with a selection of representatives from the Ministry of Education and Training. It began with a solid outline of the three level structure of the education system in Vietnam; elementary, middle and high school, totalling 12 years. It was also explained that there is preparation education provided before elementary school.

The representatives said there is much research currently being undertaken to reform and renew the system as they need to adapt with the changing demands of society.

Education is one of the most important parts of the relationship between Australia and Vietnam. Australia supplies many scholarships to Vietnamese students and on top of this, the Vietnamese Government works to send students to Australia. Their scholarships are funded in Vietnam's national budget, with approximately 930 funded each year.

In May 2012, changes will be made to the higher education law by the National Assembly. As this law hasn't been amended since 2005, it will be interesting to see what practical impact these changes have on their education system.

#### **Tuesday, 27 March 2012 - Hanoi**

##### **Visit to Ho Chi Minh's Mausoleum.**

We began the day with a visit to Ho Chi Minh's Mausoleum. This is an imposing building where the body of the former President remains.

The Mausoleum is located in Ba Dinh Square. The delegation was escorted by an army official, by-passing the queues. We were escorted into the centre of the room where the body rests. After staying for a few seconds, the lines continue at a slow walking pace and out from another door and exit towards the Presidential Palace.

The Presidential Palace was built to house the French Governor General by a French architect. President Ho Chi Minh only used it to house guests and it is still being used today by the current government. Ho Chi Minh lived in other buildings behind the palace.

The delegation then made their way to the Ho Chi Minh museum. The museum had a lot of notes from Ho Chi Minh, clothes and war material used by foreign and Vietnamese soldiers.

The Mausoleum is an important place politically for the Communist Party and the Government.

### **Courtesy Visit to the Deputy Secretary General of the Vietnam National Assembly, Dr Dzung Nguyen**

Dr Nguyen, who studied English in Canberra, spoke to the delegation in English. He also studied in Russia in the 1970s. Dr Nguyen is not an elected representative and he is classified as an appointed civic servant that oversees the Governance of the National Assembly.

He gave us a brief overview of the National Assembly:

- National Assembly has 500 members;
- Term of office is five years;
- It has the power to amend and make laws; and
- It also has the responsibility to legislate and implement plans and budgets.

Dr Nguyen mentioned the National Assembly recommended to the Parliament of a \$55 billion rail project for Vietnam. But the Parliament rejected the recommendation because it was not their priority. He used that as an example that the Parliament decides on the priorities and considers recommendations accordingly.

Dr Nguyen mentioned a number of challenges, including raising the number of full time MPs from 25% to 35% in the next five years.

He also would like to see the MPs becoming more professional and concentrating in fields and areas such as human rights, liberty and the rule of law.

Dr Nguyen did mention the availability of internet services and the education provided to the community. This was obvious to the delegation as we noticed wireless internet available almost at every café and restaurant.

### **Visit to Vice Executive President of Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry – Dr Khuong Duy Doan**

Dr Khuong briefed the delegation on the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry:

- The Chamber was established in 1963 and works under a legal framework.
- Out of 500,000 businesses and companies, 10,000 are members of the Chamber. Members are from a diverse range of industries such as agriculture, manufacturing and the skilled workforce.
- There is one Chamber of Commerce in Vietnam which employs about 1,000 people.
- They have a target growth of 7.5% per annum. Last year their growth was just below 6%.

Dr Khuong mentioned some of the challenges facing the industries the Chamber represents: very high inflation, interest rates of 15% which are too high for business to grow. He also mentioned the very high unemployment rate.

Dr Khuong believes eventually the economy will move to a market-based economy from the state oriented economy. He sees the opportunities for Government to create an environment for businesses to invest. He also would like to see the Government spending more on training a skilled workforce.

### **Visit Director-General of Hanoi Foreign Affairs Department – Mr Due Van Ha**

Mr Ha gave us a demographic overview of Hanoi and its projects. Ten years ago, Hanoi was 900km<sup>2</sup> with a population of 35 million people. Currently, Hanoi has grown to 3,400km<sup>2</sup> with 6.5 million residents.

They have a plan in 2050 to have created five cities around Hanoi with five underground public transport networks. The first underground network proposed will be a 12.5km link from the airport to Hanoi. This project is expected to be completed by 2017.

They also have plans to build infrastructure such as highways and three further bridges over the Red River, taking the total from four to seven. They also plan to invest into social infrastructure such as schools and hospitals.

Twenty-three years ago, there were only four to six square metres of personal space per person. This has now risen to 12 square metres per person. In 2030, they expect the forecast of residents to be 10 million people.

They are open to investment to complete their projects by joint ventures - 100% foreign investment and Public Private Partnership investments.

### **Dinner with Quan Van Bui, President of the Young Entrepreneurs of Vietnam**

Mr Bui came to Australia in a previous Vietnam delegation visit to Australia through the Australian Political Exchange Council. He is an entrepreneur with investment in various areas such as mining and construction. He is currently building a 52-storey apartment complex.

We discussed the business environment in Vietnam and what it takes to be successful as a business person. Mr Bui said that having good relations with Government was most important for business success.

## **Wednesday, 28 March 2012– Hanoi / Da Nang**

### **Meeting with Mr. Tran Dac Loi, Vice Head of the Communist Party Foreign Department**

Mr Loi began the meeting by mentioning that he had participated in an Australian Political Exchange Council program to Australia many years ago. Mr Loi believes that this exchange program helps develop mutual understanding and opens young politician's minds to different concepts, problems and solutions.

Our delegation leader asked Mr Loi to offer his view on two issues:

- How can the Australian-Vietnam relationship be enhanced; and
- What is the nature of the relationship between Vietnam and the two large powers in the region (USA and China)?

Mr Loi responded by stating that we need to first look at the historical dynamics. There are big differences in the level of development between the two countries. In culture and in history we

have been on opposing sides. Today, Vietnam and Australia have no substantial opposing interests. Mr Loi went on to outline a range of common interests between Australia and Vietnam including:

- peace and stability for the region;
- economic and sustainable development in the region; and
- the development of solutions for global and regional problems (eg climate change).

Mr Loi then posed the question – how can we project the relationship between Australia and Vietnam in a beneficial direction?

In response to this question, Mr Loi said that he believes that the two countries need to work harder to develop a framework of security for the region in a more systematic way.

Mr Loi said that he preferred ASEAN to other regional forums and that there is value in pursuing a regional security framework modelled on the UN Security Council. Without this, individual countries will build up their military based on their own economic might.

In relation to the relationship between Vietnam and the global powers, Mr Loi stated that the United States and China are the big players and their policies towards each other and to other nations will be the key to the development of relationships. Vietnam has expectations that big players observe the fundamental principles of the United Nations, respect other nations and pursue peace. On China, Mr Loi observed that China is growing very fast and is assuming a greater role and influence in the region. China's rise is a positive development for Vietnam as long as they respect the region. The expansionist approach of China may be a problem for the region; however Vietnam is trying to maintain a friendly relationship whilst still aggressively defending its territory and independence.

On other issues, Mr Loi stated that:

- provision of education services is most important. Vietnam has plenty of unskilled labour but is lacking those with managerial skills as well as in the areas of science and technology. Unfortunately the Vietnamese education system does not always align with demand.
- Vietnam supports the policy of Australia being closer to the Asian Community. Whether this deepens depends on whether Australia wants to project itself east or west.
- The Communist Party does not provide concrete policy directions to the Ministry but does provide it with the general strategic direction.

### **Visit to Hoi An**

After arriving in Da Nang in the afternoon, the delegation visited the ancient town of Hoi An. Hoi An is a charming old town that has been classified as a world cultural heritage site by UNESCO. The town developed around a centuries-old international seaport and still has many of its original streets, wooden shops and buildings intact.

## **Thursday, 29 March 2012 – Da Nang / Ho Chi Minh**

### **Meeting with Da Nang People's Council**

The day began with an early morning meeting with the Da Nang People's Council, the governing body of the city of Da Nang. We were greeted by Mr Tran Tho, the Vice Permanent Secretary of the Da Nang People's Municipal Committee.

Mr Tran identified that we were visiting Da Nang on the 37<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the city's liberation and that we were not staying long enough in Da Nang to enjoy the city's hospitality. He provided the delegation with a brief overview of Da Nang City, which:

- is one of the most important cities in all of Vietnam;
- is a young a dynamic city which has experienced a significant economic boom over the last 15 years;
- is one of six self-governed cities in Vietnam;
- has an approximate population of 1 million residents;
- derives much of its economic success from the local ports and through tourism, as Da Nang acts as a central location to access numerous tourist locations in central Vietnam; and
- is focusing heavily on improving the education of its residents.

Mr Tran praised the Da Nang Provincial Youth Union for their significant contribution to the development of Da Nang City. He explained that the Da Nang Youth Union is focused on expanding welfare programs and training the young people of Da Nang City.

### **Meeting with Da Nang Provincial Youth Union (DNPYU)**

Our next meeting was with the leadership group of the Da Nang Provincial Youth Union which was headed by its Secretary, Mr Luong Nguyen Minh Triet.

The youth leaders provided a brief overview of the DNPYU and its activities. This information included:

- The Union currently represents 150,000 youth members. This figure itself represents 50% of the 300,000 eligible members between the age of 16 and 30 who live in Da Nang;
- Young people represent 60% of the labour force in Da Nang City;
- Young people are viewed as being extremely important to developing social programs within Da Nang City;
- The DNPYU is categorised as a socio-political organisation;
- Its primary tasks include:
  - Educating young people in politics and idealism as well as encouraging an appreciation for the city of Da Nang and Vietnam;
  - Providing young people with ideal lifestyle skills;
  - Providing information on moral and political aspects of life; and
  - Organising activities for young people that include blood drives, careers advisory services and a 'job hunting festival' to promote local jobs, and other social activities.

The DNPYU leaders also explained that they actively search for and identify potential leaders amongst their ranks. Invitations are then often extended to these potential leaders to join the Communist Party of Vietnam where they are further mentored and encouraged to take on leadership roles.

The DNPYU also aims to provide a number of important social welfare services which include offering scholarships to students in poorer households, providing aged care services to the aged who still live at home and providing free meals for patients in hospital.

### **Meeting with the People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City**

Our final meeting for the day was with the People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City where we were greeted by Mr Hua Ngoc Thuan, the Vice Chairman of the People's Committee. Mr Hua provided us with a brief overview of Ho Chi Minh City. He explained that:

- The name of the city was changed from Saigon to Ho Chi Minh City to reflect the heroism of its residents during the reunification of Vietnam;
- Ho Chi Minh City is only 300 years old and is therefore quite young and dynamic;
- The city covers an area of 2,000km<sup>2</sup> with 24 districts and 322 local wards.

- The total population of Ho Chi Minh City is approximately 10 million people comprised of 7.8 million residents, 400,000 students and over 1 million permanent residents;
- The city is the centre for politics, science and research and trade within the southern economic zone of Vietnam;

Mr Hua explained that Ho Chi Minh City is the economic power house of Vietnam. The cities productivity represents one third of the nation's GDP with a focus on service industries (51% of its GDP), agriculture (2% of its GDP) and construction (45% of its GDP). He also explained that Ho Chi Minh City is on track to grow at a rate of 12% per annum.

Mr Hua identified a number of challenges which will prevent further growth in the medium term. These included managing motor vehicle traffic in the city, preventing flooding, improving infrastructure and protecting the environment.

To tackle the issues of traffic and infrastructure Ho Chi Minh City is seeking to build six separate metro lines to connect the CBD with its local districts. The first line will open in 2015 and stretch for 17km. It is funded by the German and Japanese Governments at a value of USD \$1.2 billion and will incorporate both elevated and below ground lines.

The leaders of Ho Chi Minh City expressed their desire for foreign investors to invest in their city. They have a vision of lifting Ho Chi Minh City to the standards of many of the larger Asian cities including Singapore and Hong Kong.

#### **Dinner meeting with the Ho Chi Minh City Youth Union**

For dinner we were hosted by the Ho Chi Minh City Youth Union. The informal environment provided us with the opportunity to discuss the activities of the local Youth Union and to also exchange ideas on engaging young people in politics.

### **Friday, 30 March 2012 -- Ho Chi Minh City**

#### **Visit to Department of Industry and Trade**

Since the introduction of 'doi moi' policy in 1986, Vietnam has gradually opened its economy to the world. Its centrally planned system has moved into a more socialist-oriented market economy when the reforms were introduced through the 'open door' policy and the country's economic development expanded rapidly through the 90s until recently, when the global financial crisis hit the country.

Education and Foreign Investments were the two subjects touched upon consistently throughout the recent Australian Political Exchange Council delegation visit to Vietnam. From Hanoi, to Da Nang to Ho Chi Minh City, these two matters were raised by the various Communist Party officials and Department heads.

In education, it was acknowledged that many Vietnamese students have studied at an Australian University or one of its private colleges. In private investments or joined ventures, Australia plays an important role, being one of the western countries that have invested in Vietnam.

There are currently 28 Australian representative offices in Ho Chi Minh City, according to the Permanent Vice Director of Department of Industry and Trade, Mrs Quach To Dung. Mrs Dung said that economic trade relationship between Ho Chi Minh City and Australia was "great". Despite the global economic crisis, she said export to Australia increased to 28.8% in 2010. Export materials to Australia were mainly agricultural products, textiles and electric cables.

In 2011, HCMC exports to Australia valued \$250 million. Mrs Dung said the Australian market demands high quality products. Vietnam has been able to satisfy Australia's certification processes and therefore, Vietnamese products have been allowed to enter the Australian market. HCMC also imports from Australia - especially fruit.

HCMC contributes to 90% of the Vietnam's GDP. But the increased economic activities in HCMC do not reflect in HCMC's statistics - large corporations such as petroleum companies, while based in the city, incorporate their revenue and benefits into the national figures.

There is a desire to increase trade between Vietnam and Australia. Mrs Dung believed that items such as leather, shoes, clothes, wooden products as well as technological products can be produced in Vietnam for the Australian market.

Australia can claim success in its export of education with many of Vietnamese students coming to our country to gain their under-graduate and post-graduate degrees. The RMIT is the first western university to have been set up in Vietnam and is now considered one of the most prestigious Universities in the country. It has just celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of establishment in Hanoi.

The Department would like to see the following products exported to Australia over the next ten years: electronic items, mechanical items, processed food and agriculture, as well as the continuation of Vietnamese items currently being exported to Australia.

HCMC was keen for the views of the delegation about the needs and demands of Australia. They are very keen to produce products that would satisfy the demands of the Australian market.

Vietnam joined the WTO in 2007 and has set a timeline to build the infrastructures needed to prepare Vietnam to open its economy.

### **Vietnamese Women's Union**

The Women's Union was established by the Communist Party of Vietnam. The Union's budget is decided by the Government. Their role is to actively create activities to attract women and encourage them to join the organisation.

Women make up 52% of the population of Ho Chi Minh City – more than 10 million. More than 80% of this figure are women aged 18 years and up. The Union has approximately one million members.

The Union is the body representative that protects the rights of women and children. They are focused on the family structure, and assist in creating "harmony and balance in society".

The Union see its role as an advisory one – advising the Ho Chi Minh City leaders on how to involve women, and ways in which women can be provided with further opportunities to participate in society. The Union has asked the city Leaders to adopt five goals for the development of women, believing that achieving these goals will help women advance in Vietnamese society. Three of these goals include:

- Working to decrease number of poor households.
- Increasing the number of women in the National Assembly – within the National Assembly for the term 2011 - 2015, female participation rate is 26%.
- Developing policy to encourage female officials.

According to the Permanent Vice President of the Women's Union in Ho Chi Minh City, Mrs Tran Thi Bich Thuy, within the plan to develop the city, the Party Leaders would like to focus on women and their role in society. It appears this is a 'legal' requirement (policy).

### **Visit to the Vietnam Veterans' Affairs organisation.**

The Veterans' Affairs organisation has 62,000 members, 8,000 of which are female.

On top of the many required administrative tasks, Veterans' Affairs are involved in local school activities and play an important role in the lives of the Vietnamese people. There are about 500 clubs for veterans – this is similar to RSLs in Australia, providing a forum for veterans to get together and commemorate their involvement in the wars.

If a veteran had fought with the South regime, they do not get the benefits or are entitled to join the Vietnam Veterans' Affairs.

There is a National Service in Vietnam. All young men from age of 18 must register for national service for one and a half years. Every year, there's a quota for each region. These numbers are calculated annually based on the needs of the region.

This year, HCMC managed to recruit 50 young women to national service, and these women will be trained to serve through the communication and nursing units.

The National Service is considered a 'duty'. Young people are expected to serve the nation and therefore they do not get paid, but if their families are poor then these families get some form of compensation – although very small.

People are recruited at a young age, normally after they have finished high school. As a result, some young people called to national service are also trained in a trade or some kind of profession.

Three important dates for the Vietnamese veterans are:

1. 22 December 1941 - commemorates the establishment of Vietnamese army
2. 6 December 1989 - establishment of the Veterans' Association
3. 27 July - Commemorates Invalid Soldiers Day

### **Meeting with Saigontourist**

Tourism plays a large part in Vietnam with Saigontourist, an arm of the Government, controlling a big share of the promotional and marketing work to attract tourism to Vietnam. Their main activities are hotel resorts, restaurants, transports and participate in trade fairs in Australia and other countries. They employ 17,000, with 30% of the total tourism market controlled by Saigontourist. The majority of tourists coming to Vietnam are aged 40 years and above. Private investment plays a huge role in Vietnam and also in Ho Chi Minh City.

Australians are amongst the top five nationalities to visit Vietnam and within the top three for Saigontourist. Saigontourist said they have a good relationship with many tourism and marketing agencies around the world.

Tourism has grown tremendously in Vietnam. In 2006 there were one million tourists and now in 2011, there are six million.

## **Saturday 31 March 2012 – Cu Chi Tunnels**

### **Visit to the Cu Chi Tunnels**

After a two-hour bus trip from the hotel in Ho Chi Minh City, the delegation arrived at the site of the Cu Chi Tunnels. The Cu Chi Tunnels are a web of tunnels in the forest grounds of Cu Chi used by the Viet Cong during the Vietnam War. The delegation was allocated a guide who took us on a two-hour tour of the site. During the tour, the delegates were particularly taken aback by the rudimentary but vicious traps invented by the Viet Cong to trap and injure their enemy.

In a reminder that many of us in the West need to improve our diet and exercise more, the tour guide explained that many of the tunnels and their hidden entrances had been widened or altered so that Westerners could fit inside. The delegates were given a chance to climb through the tunnels for a short distance and a chance to sample some war time food – cassava and lotus tea.

The delegates were struck by the ingenuity of the Viet Cong. For example, the clever design of meeting rooms and tunnel entrances, and the way in which smoke from cooking was concealed so as not to reveal people's locations.