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WHY VIETNAM NEEDS FREEDOM NOW

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By NGUYEN DAN QUE

June 24, 2008 -- PROTESTS will surely surround Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's meeting today with President Bush. But Dung will no doubt still find it a relief to be out of his own country: Back home, the economy is in turmoil, with popular discontent rising.

Yet the crisis presents Dung with a huge opportunity: the chance to open up the system and go down in history as a reformer.

Vietnam has enjoyed strong growth these last few years, and acceptance into the World Trade Organization has put it firmly on the path of integration into the world economy. But Dung's campaign of doi moi (economic renovation) is in trouble, as the people suffer a host of ills.

Inflation rose 25 percent in May, with food prices up to 42 percent higher than a year ago. Unemployment is high. Soaring global oil prices add to the pain - as does the weaker US dollar, which lowers the value of remittances sent from overseas Vietnamese.

And all this helps expose a bigger problem - an oppressive state bureaucracy that is now the chief obstacle to progress.

The government can't seem to control inflation; the education system doesn't teach young people the skills they need for a global economy.

Huge government investments are plowed into inefficient national companies. Abuses of power, such as the expropriation of land without fair compensation, are rampant.

Increasingly, Vietnamese are showing their frustration - with responses ranging from simple non-cooperation to the nationwide wave of factory strikes.

The government has responded in typical fashion - arresting activists, freelance bloggers, lawyers, businessmen, students, farmers and workers.

Vietnam still has huge growth potential. Last year, overseas Vietnamese sent more than \$7 billion to family back home - a significant boost for the economy. Overseas donors and lending agencies have promised millions in aid.

And foreign direct investment rose by \$15.7 billion in just the first few months of this year.

In short, the problem Dung faces is not a lack of willing investors. It is a government bureaucracy that remains defiantly rigid and unaccountable.

Consider Vietnam's most notorious recent corruption case, where government officials appropriated millions of dollars - some of it funded by foreign aid - to place bets on European soccer matches.

Several officials were put on trial and convicted of misusing the funds and then trying to cover up their misdeeds with bribery.

But then, last month, two newsmen who helped expose the scandal were arrested - which most Vietnamese see as the

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bureaucracy's revenge.

It will be next to impossible for the nation to address corruption and hold authorities accountable if journalists who expose these misdeeds are threatened with jail.

This is Dung's moment - if he'll take it. He needs to impress upon the politburo of the Vietnamese Communist Party that managing all the strains of a fast-developing society is easier if there is a free market of opinions as well as of goods and services.

Economic strains will confront the government with some tough decisions. But these decisions will be easier to sell to the people if citizens feel they have had some say in reaching them.

Why wait? By using today's problems to open up, Dung can help bring stability and prosperity to Vietnam. By changing its present stagnant course, Hanoi can ensure that unrest does not break out into chaos - something no one wants, least of all foreign investors with hundreds of millions at stake.

And by opening up, Dung will help the Vietnamese achieve something that millions of their neighbors already have: freedom.

This is also a unique moment for the United States. American influence (mainly via growing US investment) is the only real agent for change in the country right now; Vietnam desperately needs that influence to continue.

The people need increased trade and outside investment so we can improve our education system and lift ourselves out of poverty. But we also need investors to speak out on the need for reform that will increase transparency and accountability - and help build a democratic Vietnam that respects the dignity and rights of its people.

We Vietnamese want change. We know that the government can't deny us our freedoms forever. And we hope America's business and political leaders take the chance to remind Vietnam's prime minister of that truth during their meetings this week.

Vietnamese democracy advocate Nguyen Dan Que spent 20 years in prison. He is now under house surveillance in Saigon.