War remains may be studied
Pentagon considers DNA analysis of Korean War victims

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Anticipating an influx of remains from the Korean War, the Pentagon is considering a promising system of DNA analysis to match body fragments with unaccounted-for Americans.

Such an effort would be costly and time-consuming, said a Pentagon spokesman, Maj. Steve Little, said Wednesday that no decision had been made to proceed.

Not a single set of remains returned from Korea in 25 years has been identified, and a study done for the Pentagon this year warned that the Army's main forensic laboratory may become "an expensive warehouse for the bones of the unknown."

The government lists 8,140 servicemen as unaccounted for from the 1950-53 Korean War. That includes 866 bodies returned in 1954 but never identified, they were buried in Hawaii.

After 1954, no remains were returned until five were handed over by North Korea in 1990. Since then, an additional 91 have been returned. None of the 96, however, has been identified, and U.S. scientists doubt any of them are bodies of Americans.

The identification problem is the dark side of a generally improving picture on repatriation of U.S. and allied servicemen who fought on the South Korean side against the Soviet- and Chinese-backed Communists in North Korea.

On Tuesday, North Korean soldiers handed over 33 coffins containing what they said were the remains of United Nations servicemen. It was the second repatriation this year, and North Korea said it would return more this month.

The main identification problem, officials say, is the damaged condition of the remains, the North's mixing of bones from multiple sets of remains in each coffin and a shortage of detail from personnel files for U.S. casualties.

A partial answer to the identification problem may be in the use of mitochondrial-DNA analysis, a relatively new forensic technique in which a DNA molecule taken from bone samples can be compared with blood donated by a maternal-line relative. It has been used to identify some U.S. remains from the Vietnam War.

In a recent Rand Corp. study for the Pentagon, Thomas D. Holland, a forensic anthropologist at the Army's Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii, called mitochondrial-DNA analysis "perhaps the most promising" technique available.

The Pentagon never publicly announced that it is considering a DNA program for Korean War remains, but officials commenting on it recently stressed that it would be a financial burden in a time of tightening defense budgets.

Edward Ross, the head of the Pentagon's POW-MIA office, wrote in an Oct. 8 letter to the Korean-Cold War Association of the Missing that in view of an "expected influx of Korean War remains," Defense Secretary Les Aspin would have to decide the DNA issue "fully aware of the impact on limited resources."

Mr. Little said he didn't know how much the DNA effort would cost.

North Korea has never said how many war remains it holds, but it may be in the thousands.

There is no official U.S. count of recoverable remains.

The Clinton administration in August adopted an agreement with North Korea to cooperate in finding, exhuming and repatriating remains of U.S. and allied servicemen. A joint "working group" was to be formed to coordinate the process, but it has held no meetings and none are scheduled.

In announcing the agreement, the Pentagon said that even using state-of-the-art recovery techniques and with full cooperation by North Korea, chances of identifying remains "will be minimal at best."

In his study, Mr. Holland said the U.S. government must insist on having the Army's Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii participate directly in on-site recovery of the remains or train the North Koreans in U.S. techniques.

"Without these changes in collection and custody practices, (the laboratory) will become an expensive warehouse for the bones of the unknown," he said.