November 30, 2011

The Honorable Kay Granger
Chairwoman, Appropriations Subcommittee on
State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs
House of Representatives
Room HB-26 The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Nita M. Lowey
Ranking Member, Appropriations Subcommittee on
State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs
House of Representatives
Room HB-26 The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairwoman Granger and Ranking Member Lowey:

As former Ambassadors and members of the Foreign Service, each of us proudly represented the United States in Laos--together, our service in this Southeast Asia nation spans more than three decades. We are encouraged by the strengthening ties between our two nations, in areas such as bilateral trade, counternarcotics, public health, and environmental conservation. In particular, we are gratified by our country’s renewed commitment to raising the United States’ diplomatic profile in the region. This was made clear when President Obama became the first United States President to ever attend the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) economic conference.

We are writing to request that the U.S. allocate $9 million for unexploded ordnance (UXO) clearance in Laos for fiscal year 2012, with substantial additional increases over the next ten years. As appropriate, the total budget for weapons removal and abatement may need to be adjusted to assure that sufficient funds are available for UXO clearance in Laos.

During Vietnam War, over 2 million tons of U.S. munitions were dropped on Laos, more than was dropped on Germany and Japan combined during the Second World War. On a per capita basis, Laos is the most heavily bombed country in history. Up to 30 percent of these bombs failed to detonate, and UXO in Laos continues to impede development and cause hundreds of casualties each year.

Just this May, three children, ages 9 to 10, from the province of Savannakhet were in a forest near their village digging for bamboo when a BLU 3 cluster bomblet exploded. One boy was hospitalized for a week, another was paralyzed, and the last child was killed. Dropped by the U.S. during the Vietnam War, the weapon was one of approximately 78 million unexploded cluster bombs that remain in Laos today. This accident was just the latest chapter in a tragic history that has resulted in more than 34,000 casualties since the end of the bombings—not to mention the grave risk to millions of Lao farmers who
work on land filled with UXO every day.

Much progress has already been made: 23,000 hectares of land have been cleared for agriculture and development. More than a million UXO have been destroyed. Each of us worked hard during our respective terms to ensure that the United States contributed to this clearance work. But there is still so much more to do. The Lao government, in partnership with the United Nations Development Program, has put in place an ambitious plan to reduce casualties from 120 per year to less than 75 per year, also making available large areas of prime land for farming and development. Despite the many challenges, the removal program in Laos is efficient and effective. A State Department representative has called the UXO program in Laos “one of the best programs in the world – the gold standard.”

An increase to $9 million for UXO clearance in Laos would enable the country to move more quickly in implementing its comprehensive 10-year strategy for UXO removal on priority lands.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of our request. We understand that budgets are tight. But we are confident that you will find removal of UXO on high priority lands and provision of victim assistance in Laos to be important humanitarian priorities and in our national interest.

Sincerely,

Douglas A. Hartwick  
Ambassador (2001-2004)

Wendy J. Chamberlin  
Ambassador (1996-1999)

Victor L. Tommeth  
Ambassador (1994-1996)

Harriet Isom  

cc: Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell, U.S. Department of State