July 8, 2011

The Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Madam Secretary:

Each of us proudly represented the United States in Laos as members of the U.S. Foreign Service. Together, our service in Laos spans more than 3 decades. We are encouraged by the strengthening ties between our two nations, and gratified by your renewed commitment to raising the United States' diplomatic profile in the Mekong sub-region.

We are delighted that you will be travelling to Bali, Indonesia, to attend a summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Your commitment to building a strong relationship with our partners in Southeast Asia is to us a source of great personal satisfaction and optimism. We are writing this letter to strongly encourage you to visit Vientiane during your trip to Southeast Asia, and to request that you address directly a crucial issue that confronted us during our respective terms in Laos: the scourge of unexploded ordnance (UXO).

During the war, over 2 million tons of U.S. munitions were dropped on Laos, more than was dropped on Germany and Japan combined in 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.

Your upcoming trip to Southeast Asia is a perfect opportunity to visit Vientiane and reaffirm a substantial U.S. commitment to addressing the UXO crisis in Laos. It has been more than 55 years since a U.S. Secretary of State last visited Laos. The important progress Laos has made in the years since in matters of economic liberalization, trade and religious freedom has already led to a remarkable improvement in U.S.-Lao relations. We feel strongly that the United States should acknowledge this progress by reaffirming our commitment to help Laos overcome the UXO crisis.

So 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. It is estimated that some 80 million UXO remain scattered across Laos. 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. An annual investment of $30 million will be required to meet these targets.

We endorse the recommendation of Legacies of War, a U.S. non-profit organization dedicated to raising awareness about the UXO problem in Laos, that the U.S. make an annual commitment of $10 million over the next ten years to strengthen and secure the Lao UXO sector’s capacity and bring its already effective programs to scale. Moreover, we ask that the U.S. work with its international partners to ensure that sufficient resources are in place for clearance teams to meet their objectives.

As former U.S. ambassadors to Laos, we are truly encouraged by the progress you have made in strengthening America’s ties with Southeast Asia, ably supported by Assistant Secretary Campbell. It is particularly timely for you to visit Laos now and help bring this enduring legacy of the Vietnam War to a safe and honorable conclusion. As President Obama said in September 2010, upon belatedly awarding an American serviceman the Medal of Honor for his heroic service long ago in Laos, “It’s never too late to do the right thing.”

Sincerely,

Douglas A. Hartwick  
Ambassador (2001-2004)

Wendy J. Chamberlin  
Ambassador (1996-1999)

Victor L. Tomseth  
Ambassador (1994-2006)

Charles B. Salmon, Jr.  

Harriet Isom  
Permanent Chargé d’Affaires (1986-1989)

Theresa A. Tull  
Permanent Chargé d’Affaires (1983-1986)

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

Director, Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement, U.S. Department of State