July 20, 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:

We are writing to request that the U.S. allocate $7 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.

Just this May, three children, ages 9 to 10, from the southern 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.

We strongly believe that the continued deaths and injuries caused by bombs dropped by the U.S. in Laos nearly four decades ago are morally unacceptable, and we call on the U.S. government to do more to clean up these unexploded weapons. An increase in U.S. funding for clearing UXO would be an
important step toward restoring the U.S.’s moral standing in the world and making the land safe once more for the people of Laos.

Laos has the tragic distinction of being the most heavily bombed country in the world, per capita. From 1964 to 1973 the U.S. dropped over two million tons of ordnance on Laos, the equivalent of a bombing mission every 8 minutes, 24 hours a day, for 9 years. U.S. bombing left close to half the country contaminated with vast quantities of UXO, littering forests, rice fields, villages, school grounds, roads, and other populated areas. Accidents involving UXO have caused more than 50,000 civilian casualties in Laos since 1964, and 40 percent have resulted in death. Two out of every five casualties have been children.

The Lao government and nongovernmental organizations, with assistance from the U.S., eighteen other countries, and the UNDP, have made modest progress in removing UXO in several provinces, including the clearance of 23,000 hectares of land and destruction of more than one million UXO. But there is still so much more to do. Less than one percent of the contaminated lands have been cleared and an estimated 78 million UXO remain scattered in Laos. Despite the many challenges, the removal program 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.”

Since signing and ratifying the Convention on Cluster Munitions a year ago, Laos has committed to clearing its cluster munitions within 10 years. In reality Laos will never be able to clear all the contaminated land, but it must speed up UXO clearance on high priority lands in villages, school yards and other populated areas, as well as agricultural fields and infrastructure development. U.S. funding for UXO clearance must be substantially increased if Laos is ever going to make meaningful progress in a reasonable time frame. An increase to $7 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 victim assistance in Laos to be an important humanitarian priority and in our national interest.

The same moral obligation which has led the U.S. to be the leading donor for UXO clearance in Laos over the past 16 years, now calls us to complete the task.

Sincerely,

Channapha Khamvongsa
Executive Director

Brett Dakin
Board Chair

cc: President Barack Obama
Secretary of State Hillary Clinton
Assistant Secretary Kurt Campbell, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific
Director, Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement, U.S. Department of State
Other members of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs: Representatives Jerry Lewis, Frank Wolfe, Tom Cole, Mario Diaz-Balart, Charles Dent, Steve Austria, Nita Lowey, Jesse Jackson Jr., Adam Schiff, Steve Rothman, Hal Rogers, and Norm Dicks

Senator Patrick Leahy, Chairman, Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs

Other members of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs: Senators Daniel Inouye, Tom Harkin, Barbara Mikulski, Richard Durbin, Mary Landrieu, Frank Lautenberg, Sherrod Brown, Lindsey Graham, Mitch McConnell, Mark Kirk, Roy Blunt, Dan Coats, Ron Johnson, John Hoeven