July 14, 2010

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 Foreign Service. Together, our service in Laos spans more than 3 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 your renewed commitment to raising the United States’ diplomatic profile in the Mekong sub-region. As you observed last year, “the United States is back in Southeast Asia.”

Much has changed since the end of hostilities in Indochina more than thirty-five years ago. Though there is still considerable room for improvement, Laos has made steady progress in the areas of economic liberalization, trade, and religious freedom. Indeed, last year the Administration declared that Laos has “ceased to be a Marxist-Leninist country.”

One legacy of the war, however, endures: the scourge of unexploded ordnance (UXO) that still litters the Lao countryside. During the war, over 2.5 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.

During our respective tenures, each of us worked hard to address this immense problem in various ways. Yet its enormity dwarfed our collective efforts. We recognize that only steady U.S. leadership and additional resources will ultimately bring this sad and unfortunate legacy of the Vietnam War to a safe and honorable conclusion.

In April, the House Foreign Affairs Committee held the first hearing ever held by Congress on the problem of UXO in Laos. Committee members heard testimony from Scot Marciel, Deputy Assistant Secretary and Ambassador for ASEAN Affairs, and representatives of the NGO community. 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.
A representative of the Department’s own Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement recently declared Laos’ UXO program to be “one of the best programs in the world – the gold standard.” With 15 years of experience, trained personnel, new regulatory mechanisms and a 10-year plan in place, the Lao UXO sector is now ready to absorb a significant increase in resources. Lao fields, forests and villages must be rendered safe again. Resources are key.

Sincerely,

Douglas A. Hartwick  
Ambassador (2001-2004)

Victor L. Tomseth  
Ambassador (1994-2006)

Charles B. Salmon, Jr.  

Wendy J. Chamberlin  
Ambassador (1996-1999)

Theresa A. Tull  
Ambassador (a.i., 1983-1986)

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