March 20, 2012

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 $10 million for unexploded ordnance (UXO) clearance in Laos for fiscal year 2013, with sustained funding over the next 10 years. In light of the current fiscal situation, this request represents a modest increase of $1 million increase over FY12 and responds to a need for a sustained commitment to resolving the Lao UXO issue. 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.

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. At least one-third of the land across all 17 provinces of Laos remains littered with cluster submunitions and other deadly UXO dropped 40+ years ago. In a country where 80% of the population lives in rural areas, the threat of UXO makes hundreds of thousands of hectares unavailable for farming or development. Fields that could feed Lao citizens, 40% of whom are malnourished, lie fallow because of contamination. At least 20,000 people have fallen victim since the end of the bombing; approximately 100 people continue to die from UXO accidents each year, and more are maimed. Twenty percent of these victims are injured or killed while
farming. In response to this, the United Nations recently took the unprecedented step of adding a Ninth Millennium Development Goal for Laos: reducing the harm of UXO.

The time to act on this issue is now. The State Department Office of Inspections, in a 2010 review of the Embassy in Vientiane, found that while the UXO clearance program is one of the most important political and economic activities the U.S. currently pursues in Laos, it is endangered by inconsistent funding. The program has made many strides in removing deadly UXO from Lao soil in recent years, increasing the land available for farming and development. In the words of the Office of Inspections, “to risk losing such gains would be a poor choice at this moment in the improving U.S.-Lao dialogue.”

In addition to the geopolitical dimensions, continuity -- rather than the current “feast or famine” cycle -- is needed to allow UXO clearance teams to plan accordingly, scale up operations, and finally get the job done. In summer 2011, six former U.S. Ambassadors to Laos wrote a joint letter to Secretary Clinton endorsing our call for $10 million per year, sustained over 10 years, “to strengthen and secure the Lao UXO sector’s capacity and bring its already effective programs to scale.” A State Department official has called the UXO program in Laos “one of the best programs in the world – the gold standard” and fully capable of absorbing additional funds. A $10 million appropriation in FY13 would signal a commitment to providing significant, sustained support for the UXO sector in Laos and solidify our friendship with an important ASEAN partner.

Supporting the clearance of unexploded bombs in Laos is not only good foreign policy, it is also the right thing to do. In the 2012 Omnibus report, Congress specifically recognized the responsibility of the U.S. to prioritize the “clearance of unexploded ordnance (UXO) in areas where such ordnance was caused by the United States,” such as Laos. The U.S. has the opportunity to finally bring to an end a 40-year legacy and allow a new generation of Lao citizens to build a legacy of peace and prosperity.

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.

Sincerely,

Channapha Khamvongsa
Executive Director

Brett Dakin
Chair, Board of Directors

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
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Representatives Jerry Lewis, Frank Wolf, Tom Cole, Mario Diaz-Balart, Charles Dent, Steve Austria, Nita Lowey, Jesse Jackson Jr., Adam Schiff, Steve Rothman,

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