March 22, 2010

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

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

Dear Chairwoman Lowey and Ranking Member Granger:

We are writing to request that the U.S. allocate $7 million for unexploded ordnance (UXO) clearance in Laos for fiscal year 2011, 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.

We strongly believe that the continued deaths and injuries caused by United States (U.S.) bombs dropped in Laos nearly four decades ago are morally unacceptable. On February 22, 2010 five children, ages 10 to 14, were killed in a rice field by a BLU 3 cluster bomblet in southern Laos. This is just the latest chapter in a tragic history that has resulted in over 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 unexploded ordnances.
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. 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, including 78 million unexploded cluster bomblets that litter forests, rice fields, villages, school grounds, roads, and other populated areas. Accidents involving UXO have caused over 50,000 civilian casualties since 1964 — 40 percent have resulted in death. One third of UXO casualties are children.

Laos has some of the most heavily contaminated lands in the world and accounts for half of all cluster bomb casualties worldwide, but has received scant U.S. demining assistance. We ask only that Laos be given levels of funding commensurate with its devastating UXO problem. In addition to the terrible human cost of deaths and injuries, the impoverished Lao economy is further stymied by the presence of UXO. Hundreds of children have been orphaned. Families are left without the main breadwinner and struggle to survive. The extremely limited health care system is overwhelmed by the medical needs of UXO victims. Available funding does not begin to meet the demand for artificial limbs, rehabilitation or employment retraining. And infrastructure projects are burdened with the increased costs of first removing UXO.

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 (less than one percent of the contaminated lands have been cleared). Despite the many challenges, the removal program is efficient and effective. Charles A. Stonecipher, Program Manager for the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the State Department’s Bureau of Political-Military Affairs has called the NRA’s UXO program in Laos “one of the best programs in the world – the gold standard.”

As one of the first countries to sign and ratify the Convention on Cluster Munitions (the agreement enters into force August 1, 2010), Laos is 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 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.

The U.S. cannot continue to ignore its moral obligation to clean up the UXO it left behind almost 40 years ago.
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          Brett Dakin  
Executive Director            Board Chair

cc: President Barack Obama  
Secretary of State Hillary Clinton  
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 Jesse L. Jackson, Jr., Adam Schiff, Steve Israel, Ben Chandler, Steven R. Rothman, Barbara Lee, Betty McCollum, David R. Obey, Ex Officio, Mark Steven Kirk, Ander Crenshaw, Dennis R. Rehberg, Jerry Lewis, Ex Officio

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

Senators Diane Feinstein, Jeff Merkley, Robert Menéndez, Jeff Bingaman, Susan Collins Sherrod Brown, Benjamin Cardin, Maria Cantwell, Barbara Boxer, Olympia Snowe, Robert Casey, Debbie Ann Stabenow, Patty Murray, Russell Feingold, Richard Durbin, Barbara Mikulski, Bernard Sanders, Sheldon Whitehouse, Tim Johnson, Ron Wyden

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