

**Testimony of Scot Marciel  
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**Before the**

**House Foreign Affairs Committee  
Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific and the Global Environment**

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**Legacies of War: Unexploded Ordnance in Laos**

Chairman Faleomavaega, Ranking Member Manzullo, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify today on unexploded ordnance in Laos.

**Overall Relationship**

As Secretary Clinton observed last year, “the United States is back in Southeast Asia.” We have held the first ever leaders-level meeting between the United States and ASEAN, signed the Treaty for Amity and Cooperation, committed to stationing our Ambassador to ASEAN in Jakarta, and launched the innovative Lower Mekong Initiative to raise the U.S. diplomatic profile in the Mekong sub-region.

Our efforts to build the United States’ relationship with Laos should be seen in the context of our efforts to deepen our engagement in the region. Our efforts with Laos are making important progress. Last year, we exchanged defense attaches, the first time we have done so since the end of the Vietnam conflict. The Obama Administration also removed Laos -- one of the poorest countries in Asia -- from the list of “Marxist-Leninist economies” prohibited from benefiting from Export-Import Bank financing. Earlier this month, Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell visited Vientiane for the third session of the U.S.-Laos Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue in Laos. We have made significant gains in areas ranging from the accounting for Americans lost during the conflict to development of bilateral trade liberalization measures. Our success in recovering and accounting for 237 of the 578 Americans lost during the conflict is just one example of joint

collaborative efforts. Recently we have expanded our cooperation into new areas, including health, trade, and military-to-military relations.

Our foreign assistance program in Laos, carried out jointly by the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), is modest, but it is growing both in size and scope. Our efforts are aimed at supporting economic reform and good governance, building a vibrant civil society, and improving health for the people of Laos. Our assistance includes programs to address humanitarian needs, including avian influenza, HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention, and building food security. One of the most important elements of our programmatic engagement in Laos is in supporting the removal of unexploded ordnance, or UXO.

### **Unexploded Ordnance in Laos**

During the Vietnam War, over 2.5 million tons of U.S. munitions were dropped on Laos. This is 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 the bombs dropped over Laos failed to detonate. U.S. –origin aerial weaponry accounts for a large proportion of the unexploded ordnance that is still a significant threat to public safety in Laos. The explosive remnants of war continue to impede development and cause hundreds of casualties a year. While Laos also has a landmine problem, unexploded ordnance is a much greater threat to the population, especially because of the value of UXO scrap metal, the pursuit of which brings individuals into direct contact with the weapons. Explosive remnants of war from land battles constitute a significant third threat. Population growth in rural areas and other socio-economic trends are increasing demand to put UXO-contaminated land into production, a development that also increases human contact with all of these dangerous remnants of war.

With U.S. and other international support, the Lao People's Democratic Republic is creating a much-needed comprehensive national database to consolidate different data sets and generate accurate and up to date information on the scope of the contamination. Current statistics on contamination, clearance, and casualties are not always reliable, but efforts to refine the data are revealing the continued seriousness of the problem. For example, until a very recent systematic study, casualties per year were believed to average about 100 – we now know that they likely number closer to 300 per year. Similarly, while no one can guess the total number of explosive items contaminating Laos, extensive survey efforts continue

to refine our knowledge and help us direct our efforts at the ten out of seventeen provinces judged most affected.

The socio-economic effects of the contamination are pervasive. The UN Development Program has reported that “UXO/mine action is the absolute precondition for the socio-economic development of Lao PDR” and that because of UXO “economic opportunities in tourism, hydroelectric power, mining, forestry and many other areas of activity considered main engines of growth for the Lao PDR are restricted, complicated and made more expensive.” At the level of individual victims, of course, the consequences of death or maiming are catastrophic for entire families.

Despite the grim scope of the problem, however, it would be a mistake to be pessimistic about our ability to help resolve it. Our goal, after all, is not to remove the last bit of UXO from Laos, any more than Western Europe has removed all of its explosive remnants of war from World War Two and even World War One. Instead, our goal is to help Laos become as “impact free” of its explosive contamination as possible – and the country has made major strides in that direction. For example, international support to the very solid Lao effort amounted to about \$15 million this year, resulting in the clearance of hundreds of thousands of explosive items from about seventy square kilometers of high priority land. If international support continues at that same level for a decade, the results will be dramatic: vastly reduced casualty levels and the clearance of virtually all of the country’s highest priority land areas. Much work would remain, of course, but the actual impact of the explosive remnants of war would be a fraction of what it is today. In short, this is not an insurmountable task.

### **Update on U.S. Government Activities**

To address the explosive remnants of war problem in Laos, the Department of State supports a variety of humanitarian demining and unexploded ordnance clearance projects, with funding from the Non-proliferation, Anti-terrorism, Demining and Related programs (NADR) appropriation account. One of the top goals of the program is to clear all high priority areas (specifically agricultural land, health and education facilities); another is to develop indigenous mine and UXO abatement capacity. These projects are selected and managed by the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the Bureau of Political Military Affairs, in close coordination with the Bureau of East Asia and Pacific Affairs and our Embassy in Vientiane. Although the bulk of U.S. NADR funds for Laos goes to UXO Lao -- the Government of Laos’ quasi-independent government agency

charged with conducting clearance operations -- we also fund NGOs that conduct independent clearance operations and run school-based campaigns to educate children about the dangers of tampering with UXO. Our funding supports work performed by Lao national entities (primarily UXO Lao) as well as by international NGOs such as the Mine Advisory Group, Norwegian People's AID, the Swiss Demining Foundation, and the World Education Consortium. We view our programs in Laos as very successful overall, and one in which the national authorities have established a credible and effective UXO action system.

The U.S. is the single largest donor to the UXO sector in Laos. Other major donors include Japan, the European Commission, Ireland, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Germany, and Australia. From 1993 through 2009, U.S. assistance has totaled more than \$25 million.

In FY 2009, our total assistance for Laos UXO projects was \$3.7 million. In FY 2010 we will provide \$5 million on UXO funding for Laos.

In addition to the direct funding for UXO programs provided by the Department of State, Department of Defense has provided technical and research assistance to aid in the clearance of unexploded ordnance. At the end of 2009, the Department of Defense provided UXO Lao with a searchable database known as the Combat Air Activities Southeast Asia Database, which is the most comprehensive collection of strike information from the Vietnam War. This information is critically important to the UXO sector for identifying contaminated areas and for planning and prioritizing clearance efforts. Equally important, the data may help to identify areas where the risk of UXO contamination is low and development could proceed in Laos.

This database updates Department of Defense strike data from 1998, which provided information on U.S. Air Force bombing missions conducted during the war. Although the 1998 data provided the foundation upon which virtually all Lao UXO maps were developed, with the declassification of records and inclusion of more complete records the Department of Defense realized that there was an opportunity to provide more complete data. The Department of Defense continues to research records to make sure that the Lao government has the most current available information.

Individual victims who have been injured by UXO also require both our compassion and our support. USAID provides critical disabilities assistance to assist those whose lives have been altered irrevocably by explosive remnants of

war. Through the Leahy War Victims Fund, USAID has supported the Catholic Relief Services in Laos as part of a three-year grant that began in 2006 to improve and expand education and community support systems in three districts in Laos to assist in providing educational opportunities for disabled children. The Leahy War Victims Fund also supported a grant in 2004 and another in January 2009 to Handicap International to establish community-based rehabilitation programs in partnership with the Lao National Rehabilitation Center and to improve the quality of life of people, their families and communities and to bolster the employment and economic opportunities for people with disabilities, respectively.

Since the mid-1990s, USAID has worked with World Education to assist regions of Laos that have been heavily contaminated with UXO. In 1995, USAID began to use monies from the Leahy War Victims Fund to support World Education to upgrade the medical, surgical and emergency facilities and to promote mine/UXO awareness efforts in the northern Lao provinces of Xieng Khouang and Houaphan. In 2004, USAID renewed its support for World Education efforts to expand medical assistance in Laos, this time directing aid towards Lao's southern provinces of Saravane and Champasak, near the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The World Education project and the Ministry of Health have taken a two-pronged approach. First, they work to inform national policy on UXO survivor assistance and disabilities; second, they work to improve the quality of emergency, orthopedic, surgical and medical management care for survivors of trauma and people with disabilities.

To date, USAID has provided more than \$8 million in support of programs for survivors.

### **Future USG Activities**

In coordination with the National Regulatory Authority for UXO/Mine Action, UXO-Lao, the Ministry of Defense and the Lao People's Army, the U.S. Embassy and the U.S. Pacific Command are considering a program that would assist the establishment of a UXO/Demining capacity in the Lao People's Army. The project would be phased in and the initial activities would train two LPA UXO/Demining sections and fund initial operations in two provinces. The project would eventually include more advanced training, as well as expanding the number of LPA UXO/Demining sections to five. This capacity building may eventually lead to Laos being able to contribute to international peacekeeping efforts in UXO clearance and demining operations.

## **Conclusion**

The United States has worked closely with Laos on the issue of unexploded ordnance since 1993. Our aim has been to strengthen the clearance and capacity development for UXO institutions in Laos, along with providing victims assistance and risk education programs in public schools. Through these joint efforts we hope to improve the ability of Lao authorities to protect the environment and promote public health for future generations. As we continue forward, we will work hard to ensure U.S. Government assistance helps build a safer society for the Lao people.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to appear before you today. I welcome your questions.