

June 4, 1994

The Honorable Warren Christopher
Secretary of State
United States Department of State
Washington, DC

Dear Mr. Christopher:

We are writing to you as American citizens involved in a variety of humanitarian, educational and business initiatives with Laos. Though our interests are diverse, we share common concerns about official US policy towards Laos. While we feel sympathy for the families of American servicemen lost during the US bombing of Laos, we are frustrated that US relations with Laos continue to be narrowly framed by MIA and drug control issues at the expense of other areas of concern. **We want to call your attention to another legacy of the war in Laos: unexploded US ordnance which remains a grave humanitarian issue facing the people of Laos today.**

During the war in Laos, United States forces dropped a planeload of bombs on Laos on average every eight minutes for nine years--over two million tons of ordnance in all. In terms of bomb tonnage dropped per capita, Laos became the most heavily bombed country in the history of the world. Many years later, the legacy of this bombing continues to endanger the lives of ordinary Lao people.

At a time when the United States is challenging countries around the world concerning their human rights records, we urge the government to reexamine its own record in light of the unexploded ordnance problem in Laos. The people of Laos are denied their basic human right to engage in activities to feed themselves as unexploded ordnance denies them access to their land.

Most appalling of all is the continued destruction of life and maiming of innocent individuals, many of whom are children who were not even born when these devices were unleashed on their future. In Xieng Khouang Province in 1993 alone, more than 100 people were killed or injured by unexploded ordnance. Many of those injured suffered permanent disabilities.

The unexploded ordnance problem also threatens United Nations efforts to successfully relocate thousands of Laotian refugees returning from camps in Thailand. Several proposed resettlement sites have been found to be infested with ordnance. In February 1994, three Hmong children who had recently returned to Xieng Khouang from refugee camps in Thailand were injured by unexploded ordnance of US origin.

It is a sad irony that even US government efforts in opium reduction are seriously threatened by unexploded US ordnance. Work on three US supported crop substitution projects in Houa Phan Province has recently been suspended pending removal of unexploded ordnance at project sites.

At a time when the United States has made a significant gesture of ending the war in Indochina by lifting the trade embargo against Viet Nam, we believe the government should display the same level of courage and compassion to help end the legacy of the war in Laos. Official US aid aimed at making a substantial impact on removing unexploded ordnance in Laos would be an important step towards this objective. We request, however, that this money be made available to private organizations rather than the US Department of Defense. A tiny fraction of the billions of dollars spent by the US in bombing Laos would be enough to have a major impact on resolving the ordnance problem.

We believe there is an overriding moral and humanitarian obligation on the part of the US government to assume responsibility for addressing this terrible legacy.

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In addition to assisting with unexploded ordnance removal, there are several other steps that the United States could take to further rebuild our relationship with Laos. **One would be a restoration of Most Favored Nation trading status.** Over the last five years, with US encouragement, Laos has made great changes in its economy--permitting greater individual enterprise and promoting privatization and foreign investment. These steps are hampered by the country's inability to sell products to the US on normal terms.

Beyond this issue, Laos has many of the developmental needs that might be expected of a least developed nation that has suffered a legacy of colonial exploitation, war, and isolation. Official US aid could help play a constructive role to assist the people of Laos to improve the quality of their lives as well as to encourage the positive aspects of an emerging market economy.

US government regulations currently restrict the provision of general aid to Laos. We urge you to remove those restrictions on aid and trade. While respectful of the importance that the MIA and drug control issues have for many Americans, we believe that a broader view of US interests, which would also encompass US commitments to humanitarianism, would be more productive and appropriate for all parties concerned.

We urge a review of US policy towards Laos which leads to specific commitments to address the longstanding US unexploded ordnance problem and related humanitarian issues still facing Laotians more than twenty years after the war. We also urge further US commitments to provide additional assistance for economic development. We believe these actions would remove a blight upon the United States' record of compassion and concern for the rights of individuals around the world.

Signatures:

Roger Rumpf, Asia Resource Center
Dave Berman
Michael Knowles
Janet Gardner, The Gardner Group
Chong Ae Yu, *American Friends Service Committee
Garth Osborn, Minnesota International Health Volunteers
Joy Carol, Convenor, NGO Forum on Viet Nam, Cambodia and Laos
Hakon Torjesen, *Case Western Reserve University
Larry Tankersley, Church World Service Southern Asia Office
Hue Le
Michael Bedford
Hank Roy, Indochina Project
Tran Khanh Tuyet
Jane L. G. Barton
Marcia Selva, The Global Spectrum
Jonathan Howell
J. Benson
Carol Wagner, Global Exchange
Ed Murphy, Pathfinders Institute
Paul Heer, Hmong National Development Inc.
Dennis D. Tidwell, *Adventist Development and Relief Association Viet Nam
Robert J. McKer
Valerie Sutter
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Robert E. Anderson

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Craig Etcheson, *Cambodia Campaign
Robert St. Cyr
Dick Colenso, *World Concern
William H. Rieser, *US Indochina Reconciliation Project
Anne Weills, *Cambodia Campaign
Paul Strasburg, *Volunteers in Asia
Glenn T. Handricks, *University of Minnesota
Bo Ung, *Cambodia Campaign
Rand Robinson, *CARE International
Linda Cobey
Jane Musgrove
David Elder, *American Friends Service Committee
Dia Cha
Chanthava Chanthavong, *University of Massachusetts, Amherst
Frank Proschan, *Indiana University, Bloomington
Shirley McGreal
Catherine Dunn
Kaying Yang
Lynn Lederer
Michael Johnston
Jean Bernard-Johnston, InSight Educational Media
Nara S. Sihavong
Lynn Belland Sauls
Edward Henry
Ken Martens Friesen, Mennonite Central Committee
Ann Martin, Mennonite Central Committee

* = Organization for identity purposes only

cc: House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific
Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific
Affairs
House Appropriations Subcommittee on Foreign Operations
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Foreign Operations



A Christian
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for meeting
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need

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June 9, 1994

Senator Patrick Leahy
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Fax #: 202-224-7924
Attn: Tim Reeser

Dear Senator Leahy:

The attached letter regarding US aid to Laos was originally drafted and signed in April by 43 American citizens living and work in Laos. Last week additional signatures were gathered at a conference on US NGO work in Laos, Cambodia and Viet Nam held at Marymount University in Arlington, Virginia.

I am sending you a copy of this letter now because I understand that the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Foreign Operations, which you chair, is now making final appropriations for demining in 1995. Because United States governmental regulations currently restrict Laos from receiving such aid, I would like to appeal to your subcommittee to include a "not withstanding" clause in the Foreign Aid Bill so that USAID money can be appropriated for demining in Laos through the Foreign Military Fund.

The Mennonite Central Committee has worked in Laos continuously since 1975. Since the late 1970s we have been particularly concerned about the problem of unexploded ordnance which continues to plague Xieng Khouang province. On April 12, 1994, we received formal approval from the Lao government to launch a large-scale, multi-year clearing operation in Xieng Khouang, with technical expertise provided by the British Mines Advisory Group. The focus will be on developing an indigenous capacity to clear unexploded ordnance, particularly the massive numbers of defective and aging cluster bomblets which now function like land mines.

The Mennonite Central Committee has launched a special fund appeal to Mennonite churches and individuals in North America and is committed to providing substantial funding for the first two years of this project. Mines Advisory Group is also raising funds. However, neither organization has the means to provide funding on a long-term basis. For this reason, we feel it is imperative that a more sustainable funding source be found for this long-neglected clearing work. Mennonite Central Committee does not accept USAID funds, but Mines Advisory Group currently receives OFDA funds for its clearing operations in Kurdistan and could receive USAID funds for the work in Laos.

Both Mennonite Central Committee and Mines Advisory Group have followed closely the pioneering work of you and Senator Lane Evans in seeking a long-term export moratorium on landmines. It gives us great hope to see this kind of legislative activity happening concurrently with our own efforts to make a tangible reduction in the unexploded ordnance problem of Laos, which continues to suffer senseless casualties from an air war fought two decades ago. Thank you for your work.

Sincerely,

Ann Martin
Secretary for East Asia
Mennonite Central Committee