

Statement of Heather Variava
Nominee to be U.S. Ambassador to Laos
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
May 17, 2023

Chairman Van Hollen, Ranking Member Ricketts, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for considering my nomination to be the next United States Ambassador to the Lao People's Democratic Republic. I am grateful for the faith that President Biden and Secretary Blinken have placed in me to represent the United States in Laos. I appreciate the opportunity to answer your questions and hear firsthand your thoughts about our relationship with Laos. If confirmed, I look forward to working with the Committee and other Members of Congress to advance the interests of the United States, protect the safety of our citizens, and strengthen the bilateral relationship for the benefit of both of our countries.

I would like to take a moment to thank some of my family, whose support and guidance have shaped my life in important ways: First, my mother, Catherine, and my late father, Martin, a U.S. Navy veteran, who fostered my life-long love of learning and who have supported me every step of the way, even when it took me far from home. I would like to thank my husband Billy, whose unwavering support and patience have been a strong foundation for our family, including for our sons, Nick and Nate. They have embraced life in the U.S. Foreign Service with fortitude and good humor. In addition to my family, I also want to thank the many U.S. Embassy and Consulate teams with whom I have had the honor to serve – especially the dedicated local staff who are the backbone of our overseas operations.

During nearly 27 years in the Foreign Service, I have served in South and Southeast Asia, advocating for U.S. interests, building strategic partnerships, and engaging a diverse range of stakeholders to promote democratic values and private sector-led economic growth. My experience in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam, among others, has underscored for me the importance of American leadership to ensure a free, open, and resilient Indo-Pacific region.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Ricketts, as part of our Indo-Pacific Strategy, the United States welcomes a strong and unified Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN, that leads in Southeast Asia and beyond. We support ASEAN in its efforts to deliver sustainable solutions to the region's most pressing challenges, and we are committed to deepening our long-standing cooperation on health, the environment, energy, transportation, human rights, and other issues.

As part of our work in ASEAN, I believe close cooperation with Laos is essential for a stronger, safer, more prosperous region, and for U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific. Laos is playing an increasingly important role in the region and will be in the driver's seat next year as ASEAN Chair.

The United States, of course, has a complicated history with Laos. During our involvement in the war in Indochina in the 1960s and '70s, more than two million tons of bombs were dropped over Laos. The relationship between the United States and Laos remains influenced by this war legacy. Thanks to Congress's continued support, the United States has partnered with Laos to address unexploded ordnance, even as the Lao government has actively supported the fullest possible accounting for U.S. personnel still missing in Laos from the war years.

If confirmed, I look forward to working closely with Congress on our efforts to remove unexploded ordnance from Laos. I will ensure we continue to address this history, while also working to expand and further normalize our relationship. Our programs in health, nutrition, agriculture, education, English language training, law enforcement cooperation, and more show our commitment to the U.S.-Laos relationship and demonstrate the United States' dependability as a partner. We will also continue to work with Laos as the country implements a strategy to diversify its economy, and where appropriate, educate U.S. firms about the benefits of doing business in Laos.

As our relationship with Laos has grown, so has our outreach to the people of Laos. There is no better example of U.S. commitment to Laos than our American Center in Vientiane, which, with the support of Congress, is scheduled for a significant expansion. A larger American Center will

help us respond to the huge interest from the young people of Laos in the United States and in English language training.

Our experienced U.S. Embassy team in Vientiane is dedicated to defending U.S. national interests and strengthening the U.S.-Lao relationship. If confirmed, I will be honored to lead them. I will make their safety my top priority and will join their efforts to support the Lao people and help Laos develop into a truly independent, successful country that is a valuable partner in pursuing our joint goals of regional peace and prosperity.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Ricketts, Members of the Committee, thank you for your consideration of my nomination. I look forward to your questions.