

**STATEMENT OF DAN CLUNE
AMBASSADOR-DESIGNATE TO
THE LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC**

**Before the
SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee today. I am deeply honored to have been nominated by President Obama to be the U.S. Ambassador to the Lao People's Democratic Republic. I am grateful for the President's confidence and to Secretary Kerry for his support of my nomination. If confirmed, I look forward to working with the Committee and other interested members of Congress to advance U.S. interests in Laos.

I have served our country as a Foreign Service officer since 1985 and have led large interagency teams at two embassies and here in Washington. In my most recent position I served as the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs. Previously, I was Deputy Chief of Mission and Chargé d'Affaires at the U.S Embassy in Australia. I have served previously in Southeast Asia, as the Finance and Development Officer at our embassy in Jakarta.

If confirmed, I would be greatly honored to move our foreign policy goals forward as Ambassador to Laos. Among my priorities would be promotion of human rights, removal of Vietnam War era unexploded ordnance, accounting for U.S. personnel missing in Laos from the Vietnam War, and continued improvement of people-to-people ties.

With the resumption of full diplomatic relations in 1992, U.S. - Lao cooperation has improved significantly, but there have been ups and downs along the way. Former Secretary Clinton, during her historic visit in July 2012, became the first U.S. Secretary of State to set foot in the country since John Foster Dulles in 1955. Her visit reaffirmed the United States' commitment to working with the Lao people to promote sustainable economic development and re-doubling our efforts to remove unexploded ordnance, also known as UXO.

The cornerstone of our bilateral cooperation with Laos since 1985 has been the close cooperation in accounting for U.S. servicemen and civilians still missing in

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Laos from the Vietnam War. I am committed to returning these patriots to their loved ones. I see this mission as a humanitarian one and welcome the Government of Laos' cooperation.

Continued cooperation between Laos and the United States in UXO removal has helped to reduce the number of unexploded ordnance casualties in 2012 to 56, down from an annual average of 300. If confirmed, I will continue to advance our efforts to not only clear the unexploded ordnance, but also to educate the affected communities on the dangers of UXO and assist the victims.

Earlier this year, Laos officially joined the World Trade Organization, which opened new avenues to integrate the country into the regional and global economies. The Department of State and USAID played an integral role in helping Laos reform its legal and regulatory infrastructure to be able to comply with WTO rules. A follow-on project will help them implement these reforms and move toward integration in the ASEAN Economic Community.

We will also continue our longstanding work with Laos to counter illicit drug cultivation, trafficking and addiction. Our assistance helped contribute to a sharp drop in illicit opium poppy cultivation from 1998 to 2007, and we are currently working to build support for science-based drug addiction treatment in Laos. Along with international partners, we are assisting the Lao government in implementing its Legal Sector Master Plan framework for justice sector reform.

We have worked closely with Laos and other countries in the region to support improved decision making on plans to construct dams on the mainstream of the Mekong River. Managed poorly, dams can displace local inhabitants, irreparably alter the natural habitat, and threaten fragile aquatic life. The Mekong River underpins the livelihoods and food security for nearly 70 million people. If confirmed, I will encourage cooperation between U.S. and Lao experts on smart hydropower development to sustainably develop energy resources and reduce negative impacts to local populations, habitat, and wildlife.

The United States and Laos have cooperated very closely on health related issues like the control of infectious diseases. If confirmed, I hope to devote more attention and resources to the issues of under-nutrition and the high rates of infant, child and maternal mortality. Malnutrition is the single largest cause of child mortality in Laos with 59% of all child deaths related to nutritional deficiencies.

This problem will affect Laos' social and economic development in the future and urgently needs to be addressed.

Despite the progress in our relationship, recent incidents have raised serious questions regarding the Lao government's adherence to its international human rights obligations. The December 15, 2012, disappearance of Lao civil society leader Sombath Somphone from a police post in downtown Vientiane continues to have a chilling effect on civil society. The failure of Lao authorities to conduct a transparent investigation and account for Mr. Sombath's disappearance calls into question the government's commitment to uphold human rights and the rule of law. I am also concerned about the Lao government's decision on May 27 to return nine young North Korean asylum seekers to North Korea. I hope this action does not signal a trend of sending future asylum seekers back to their home country against their will.

The increasing openness of the economy, growing access to the Internet, and the recognition by the Lao government of the importance of English language skills presents an opportunity to engage the Lao public through cultural and educational exchanges. With 70 percent of the Lao population under the age of 30, I intend to redouble mission efforts to build ties with students, young professionals, and young government officials.

The U.S. mission in Laos is small but growing; with approximately 36 direct hire Americans and 230 local staff. I am pleased to inform the Committee that construction of the New Embassy Compound should be completed in September 2014. The new facility will provide a safe working environment for the dedicated and highly capable American and Lao staff members of the U.S. Mission. I look forward to the Mission moving to this new facility, and if confirmed, to advancing the goals of the American people. Of course, I would also welcome visits by you or members of your staff.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today. I am pleased to answer any questions you may have.