

Floor Statements on H. Res. 402

Rep. Betty McCollum:

Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of this resolution, urging improved human rights, democratic reform and religious freedom in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the U.S. Ambassador in Laos, Douglas Hartwick, and his hardworking, dedicated staff at our embassy in Vientiane for their commitment toward human rights and reform in Laos.

Mr. Speaker, most Americans do not know very much about the country of Laos, but many people in my congressional district know this country very well. Minnesota is home to over 53,000 Hmong and Lao Americans. I represent one of the largest Hmong constituencies in the United States. My constituents and I strongly support improving human rights and the quality of life for the people of Laos. The Lao Government has been working cooperatively with the United States on international terrorism and helping to provide a full accounting of Americans missing in action from the Vietnam War. The Lao Government has taken steps to protect religious freedom and the hundreds of Hmong and Laotians from my district who have traveled to Laos have seen some improvement; but I want to state clearly, despite these steps, greater progress is still needed on human rights, religious tolerance, democratic rule of law, and transparency.

One way the Lao Government can demonstrate their commitment to reform is by allowing international humanitarian workers the ability to monitor the Hmong amnesty and resettlement program in order to ensure that the Hmong are receiving the humanitarian assistance they need and they deserve. My constituents and I are committed to advancing these efforts in Laos. If Laos is going to truly reform into a more open and democratic society, the United States needs to play a greater role in working with the Lao people and the Lao Government.

The United States policy of economic isolation has made it very difficult for the Hmong and Laotian Americans in my district to engage in economic activity that will improve the quality of life for their relatives in Laos. This failed U.S. policy of economic isolation has lasted close to 30 years, and it has had real human consequences, as extreme poverty is a fact of life for much of the people who live in Laos. The United Nations development program ranks Laos 143rd out of 173 countries in terms of human development. Only half the population can read, 30 percent of the people will die before they are 40 years old, and 26 percent of the population lives on less than a dollar a day. One out of every 10 children will die before they reach the age of 5. I consider this fact a human rights tragedy.

The people of Laos also endure the deadly remnants of U.S. bombing from the Vietnam War. The United States flew more than 580,000 bombing runs over Laos. More than 2 million tons of ordnance were dropped on the country of Laos, double the amount dropped on Europe during World War II. Thousands of Laotian children and adults continue to die or become maimed as a result of this unexploded American ordnance.

This, too, is a human rights tragedy and was documented by The Washington Post in an article this weekend. I insert this article for the record.

The United States must work with the Lao government to remove this unexploded ordinance. To address this issue, I have submitted a request to the appropriations committee to expand the clean-up of unexploded ordinance in Laos. I ask my colleagues today who care so very deeply about human rights in Laos to join me in this effort.

I support this resolution because my constituents have family members and loved one in Laos right now. Their poverty, hunger and hopelessness are also human rights abuses. I support engagement with the Lao government. I support holding the Lao government accountable for the actions taken against their people. And I strongly support President Bush's policy of economic engagement with Laos as a way to accomplish this goal.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I yield back the balance of my time.

Rep. Tom Lantos:

Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume. I rise in strong support of this resolution, and I urge my colleagues to do so as well.

First, I want to commend my good friend from Indiana, my distinguished colleague, for introducing this resolution; and I want to commend the gentlewoman from Minnesota (Ms. *McCollum*), the distinguished member of the Committee on International Relations, for her strong leadership on all matters related to Laos. We greatly appreciate her hard work on this long neglected region of the world.

Mr. Speaker, the bilateral relationship between the United States and Laos has been frozen in time since the end of the Vietnam War. While we have maintained a diplomatic mission in Laos, our bilateral contacts have been infrequent and low-level. Over the past few years, both the United States and Laos have made significant efforts to improve the quality of our bilateral relationship. Given the increasingly large number of Laotian and Hmong Americans in the United States, a warming in the relationship is long overdue. The President may soon, in fact, propose the granting of normal trade relations status to Laos.

As our relations with Laos become increasingly complex, the United States must not forget the ongoing deprivation of internationally recognized human rights in Laos, as well as the totalitarian nature of the ruling regime. The promotion of human rights and religious and political freedom must always remain at the core of our agenda with Laos until the Laotian people can freely choose their own government, enjoy true political freedom, and freedom of worship as they wish.

Our resolution calls attention to the negative human rights situation in Laos and urges the United States, the European Union, the United Nations, and ASEAN nations to work for positive change in Laos. The Laotian Government continues to imprison brave young people who had the courage to publicly demonstrate for political change in 1999, and some local Laotian officials continue to harass Laotians of the Christian persuasion. The Laotian Government also does not allow free and fair elections, and it prohibits any organized political opposition.

Mr. Speaker, political and social change will come to Laos, and it is my hope that the United States and our allies will make every effort to ensure that these fundamental reforms come sooner rather than later.

I strongly support passage of this resolution and urge all of my colleagues to do so as well.

Rep. George Miller:

Mr. Speaker, I have just returned from several days of meetings in Vientiane and Luang Prabang with not only our own very able ambassador, Douglas Hartwick and his excellent embassy staff, but also with Lao government officials and other private citizens--American and others--who are living and working in Laos. There is a more complex and changing picture than the wording of this resolution portrays.

Our discussions covered a wide range of topics, including that government's deficiencies in addressing human rights and political transparency issues that are detailed in H. Res. 402, and I was very clear in my conversations with Lao leaders about the urgency of meeting international standards particularly with respect to Hmong and other indigenous groups that have been the subject of ill-treatment and repression. I share the concerns of the authors of this resolution that Laos, like many other countries in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, should make substantial improvements in the openness of their political and judicial processes, comply with internationally recognized human, religious and labor rights, and promote the economic reforms that will raise the standard of living of their citizens through improved investment and trade.

This resolution addresses those issues, and I do not think many would argue with the historical record. My concern, however, is that this resolution fails to take into account very significant developments in the U.S.-Lao relationship, as well as internal changes that are not only noteworthy, but that address some of the issues raised in the resolution.

This is a delicate state in U.S.-Lao relations. We are deeply involved with that government in a range of initiatives that are critical to our own national security. I met with several U.S. personnel, for example, involved in major anti-drug efforts in cooperation with the Lao government aimed at reducing the opium and amphetamine trade that reaches from Southeast Asia to the streets of American cities. Our people reported strong cooperation from the Lao authorities and progress in turning Lao citizens against the drug trade, but this resolution ignores this cooperation.

We are also deeply involved in POW-MIA efforts in Laos, as was documented last week in the New York Times. Hundreds of Americans from the Vietnam War era are still missing in Laos, and we are sending forensic recovery teams to Laos several times a year to locate and repatriate the remains of servicemen. Again according to our government, we are receiving strong cooperation of the Lao government, but this resolution is silent on this important initiative.

Certainly the issue of human rights and the Hmong population, as well as other minorities, is a particularly sensitive subject in the Lao-American community in the United States, and I imagine that is the issue pushing this resolution to the forefront at this time. The resolution fails, however, to note that for a variety of reasons--some having to do with international pressure and some having to do with internal economics and politics--the Lao government has been urging Hmong and other dissidents to come out of the mountains where some have hidden for several decades. The government has pledged to assist in the relocation and settlement of these groups, and I would note that Secretary of State Powell has told the Lao government that the United States would like to offer its assistance in these efforts. While there is reason aplenty for hesitation given the fate of others throughout the world who have acquiesced in "resettlement" campaigns, the reports I received in Laos, across the board, testified to the positive response of the refugees; moreover, there were few if any reports of abusive or unhelpful treatment by the government. But there is no mention of that cooperation in this resolution.

It is also important that the House understand that there have been some very serious incidents of violence and threats of violence with the Lao-American community in recent weeks, including assaults on those peacefully demonstrating in support of expanded trade with Laos, arson, and threats of assassination on certain radio stations. Members of the House should be helping to defuse this situation, not adding to the ill-feelings. So it is very important that what we say and do regarding Laos and the Lao community not be misunderstood or mis-stated.

The concerns that this resolution raises about conditions in Laos are justified, but we should be clear that virtually identical statements could be made about many other countries in the region or elsewhere in the world, including those with which we have

very extensive economic and political relations. We want improvements and we should continue our efforts both bilaterally and through the U.N. and N.G.O.s to build a free and open society in Laos . One important step would be for more Members of Congress to visit the country and deliver the same message I did; yet only one other Member of the House has been to Laos in the last 5 years, I am told.

One important way for us to improve our relationship and encourage the kinds of reforms we would like to see in Laos is to grant Normal Trade Relations to that country. Laos is one of only three countries in the world with which we do not have NTR, and the only country with which we have full diplomatic relations lacking that status. Laos is far too small and poor to have an impact on the U.S. economy or jobs, but granting NTR will have a significant impact on the economy in that impoverished nation, allowing it to participate in the kind of positive economic improvements that have begun to transform Vietnam and Cambodia. Now that this resolution has been brought to the floor, I would hope that NTR for Laos would similarly be scheduled for House consideration.

I have many Lao-Americans in my own district, and I have had a close working relationship with them for a number of years. Most are refugees themselves from the repression of the post-war Lao government. They have built families, businesses, social and political organizations, and productive and cooperative lives in the United States. And together with many other Lao-Americans, they have begun to re-engage in a relationship with the country of their birth.

Members of the USA-Lao NTR Coalition, including the Lao-American Exchange Institute, the Laotian-American National Coalition and the Laotian-American Chamber of Commerce visited Laos last year and produced the important ``Citizen Initiative Report." I would like to recognize in particular Mr. Sary Tatpaporn, the Coalition's coordinator and vice president of the Laotian-American Chamber of Commerce, along with Dr. Richard Chansombat of the Lao-American Exchange, who authored the report on the trip detailing their meetings with government and private leaders. Many of these Lao-American leaders have reversed past opposition and now are urging the passage of NTR so that the economy of their former country can grow and more of their former countrymen can share in the prosperity that investment, trade and modernization can bring.

Our relationship with Laos is long and complex, and it is changing for the better. We should be encouraging the positive steps Laos is taking on a wide range of issues, and we should be expanding our cooperation with that country as we have with other nations whose domestic policies we continue to question. We also need to recognize that some of the suspicion and distrust within the Lao leadership is due to continuing threats against that government from opposition elements within the United States, as was acknowledged during the recently held conference of Lao-American leaders at the State Department.

At the same time, the Lao government must fully cooperate with the opinion of the international community that has long been concerned with the treatment of minority

groups within the country, and wish to ensure that current resettlement effort comport with internationally recognized standards. As I have noted, our own Secretary of State has offered assistance in the resettlement efforts, and our Ambassador has requested permission for his staff to visit the areas where resettlement is occurring to assure that these citizens are being treated fairly. International relief agencies also are interested in monitoring the efforts. I would hope that the Lao government would fully cooperate with these initiatives and allow for independent observation of resettlement activities. That government should understand that a well-conducted, independently verified resettlement effort will dramatically affect the perception of Laos in the world community.

Consideration of this resolution today should mark the beginning of a renewed interest and engagement in Laos by the House, not a one-time venting of opinion that ignores positive developments that are taking place and jeopardizes a longer agenda we should continue to pursue, including passage of NTR later this year. I look forward to working constructively with my colleagues towards a closer relationship with Laos which will encourage the kinds of reforms we all hope will be implemented in that nation.