McCollum seeks funding to clear Laos of U.S. explosives

WASHINGTON, DC. , (May 14, 2004) – Congresswoman Betty McCollum (MN-04) is calling on the U.S. government to work harder to eliminate a human rights tragedy in Laos by increasing funding to eliminate unexploded American ordnance dropped on the country during the Vietnam War. Up to 30 percent of this ordnance failed to detonate during the war and continue to kill and maim hundreds of people each year.

Congresswoman Betty McCollum (MN-04)

McCollum is seeking $3 million from appropriators in the U.S. House to remove unexploded ordnance in Laos.

During recent debate in the U.S. House of Representatives on H.Res. 402, a resolution urging improved human rights in Laos, McCollum called on her colleagues to support the effort to remove these explosives.

"Every day, the people of Laos endure the deadly remnants of U.S. bombing from the Vietnam War," said McCollum. "The United States flew more than 580,000 bombing runs over Laos. More than 2 million tons of ordnance was 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 is a human rights tragedy."

"Hmong and Laotian constituents I represent no longer want to hear stories of their relatives and friends in Laos whose safety remains compromised. The United States must work with the Lao government to remove this threat," said McCollum.

In addition, McCollum again called on the Lao government to carry on work with the United States to continue progress on human rights, religious tolerance, democratic rule of law and transparency 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," said McCollum. "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," McCollum continued. "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," said McCollum.❑