

**Signing Ceremony to Support
the National Regulatory Authority for UXO Sector
in Lao PDR (NRA) and UXO Lao Operations**



**Opening Remarks by Javier Barrantes
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Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare
Vientiane, Lao PDR
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Your Excellency, Mrs. Onchanh Thammavong, Minister of Labour and Social Welfare

Mr. Laolee Faiphengyooa, Vice Minister of Labour and Social Welfare

Regional Director, Swiss Development Cooperation, Mr. Martin Sommer

Distinguished guests,

It is my pleasure to welcome you to this signing ceremony for the Government of Switzerland's generous unearmarked contribution of 3 million US dollars to the UXO Trust Fund to support the the National Regulatory Authority for UXO Sector in Lao PDR (NRA) and UXO Lao Operations.

UXO contamination is an ongoing development challenge in the country. UXO continues to destroy lives and impacts on the socio-economic development of the country. Today their presence affects the Government's attempts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015 and graduate from least developed country status by 2020. UXO clearance is vital to ensure the safety of the people living in affected areas and to increase the amount of land accessible for food production and other development activities.

This is why this generous contribution by the Government of Switzerland of an unearmarked 3 million US dollars, over a three year period, is so vital. This will not only help to save lives and increase human wellbeing, but will also assist the government of Lao PDR in achieving its obligations as a State Party to the Convention on Cluster Munitions, which entered into force in August this year.

In Lao PDR the scale of the UXO problem is unprecedented, during the period 1964 to 1973 over 2 million tonnes of ordnance was dropped on the nation. If Lao is to realize its obligations within the timeframe required further resources must be generated.

Switzerland has already contributed generously to the UXO Sector in Lao PDR with 3.27 million dollars for UXO Sector operations since 2006. These funds supported the NRA to finance their core operating costs and help entrench and strengthen the NRA as the primary institution for UXO strategic direction and overall sector coordination. In addition the NRA has been able to achieve its important mandate and results in 2009 through a consultative process in reviewing and finalizing the National UXO Sector Strategy, "The Safe Path Forward II". This year the strategy was approved by the NRA Board and is currently waiting for final approval by the cabinet.

The revised strategy was aligned with the cycle of the NSEDP with a strong focus on poverty reduction and in line with the obligations required by the Convention on Cluster Munitions. In addition, the Swiss Government also generously provided two technical advisors to the NRA.

For UXO Lao these funds supported programmes in some of Lao's most affected provinces including Attapeu, Sekong, Saravane, Xiengkhang and Khammuane, as well as the operations of the National Office and Training Center. The contribution was also used to acquire detectors, vehicles and IT equipment that is being used for the Information Management System for Mine Action or IMSMA. In addition, Swiss Technical Advisors are currently helping to develop the Quality Management functions of UXO Lao, to enhance operational efficiency and effectiveness.

We have achieved a lot with the support of the Swiss Government. Since 2006 UXO Lao has destroyed or removed over 250,000 items of UXO and in the process has cleared nearly 10,000 hectares of land. Today's unearmarked contribution of 3 million dollars will further the vital work of UXO Lao and the National Regulatory Authority (NRA).

The NRA plays a vital role in regulating and coordinating activities within the UXO sector. This is why 900,000 dollars will go to the NRA to help strengthen its role. The funds will support the application of National Standards, improve the coordination, prioritisation and impact of monitoring activities and advance information flows. They will also assist the NRA as it develops a five year work plan to translate the obligations of the Convention on Cluster Munitions and the UXO Sector Strategy into actions with concrete results and time bound indicators.

The outstanding 2.1 million dollars will support the activities of UXO Lao at both the national and provincial levels. This will help to sustain operations in provinces with limited funding, further develop the national training centre, support the operations of the national office and assist in the procurement of vehicles, detectors and other equipment.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the Government of Lao PDR will host the First Meeting of States Parties to the Convention this month and will assume the Presidency for one year thereafter. Now is a great chance for strengthening our advocacy efforts and for ensuring wide support to the UXO sector.

Even though a lot has been done there are still many challenges to achieving the treaty obligations in particular clearance and victim assistance. The obligations under the Convention will not be met without sustained and increased financial support from the international community. In order to effectively and sustainably address the matter at hand, we need strong national institutions.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Trust Fund is an instrument for the Government of Lao PDR to mobilize resources and to effectively implement the Convention based on the framework of the Vientiane Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. I hope that the Government of Switzerland continues to support the national UXO institutions in Lao PDR through the UXO Trust Fund. I also encourage other donors to utilize the Trust Fund to continue to channel funds to support the UXO sector so that we can jointly work together to end unacceptable harm to civilians.

Let me once again express my gratitude to the Government of Switzerland for its continued support in reducing the risk of UXO and cluster munitions for the people of Lao PDR.

Thank you very much.