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FY 2009 FOREIGN ASSISTANCE GOALS

Laos remains a nation in transition. The forces of globalization and regionalization continue to drive the Lao Government to open the economy to market forces. Ongoing U.S. cooperation has chiefly been in the area of promoting peace and security, addressing unexploded ordnance (UXO), and counternarcotics. The United States has recently begun expanding its technical assistance to the Lao Government to build Laos' capacity to implement trade agreements and modernize its legal and regulatory framework. In health, U.S. assistance is focused on helping the Lao Government build capacity to deal with pandemic influenza, and on lowering the risk of HIV/AIDS infection among groups that are most at-risk of contracting and spreading the disease.

HIGHLIGHTS BY PROGRAM OBJECTIVE

PEACE AND SECURITY

Clearance of UXO remains a significant factor affecting the ability of the Lao Government to enhance food security for its population, and to reduce the extreme poverty present in a country where up to 80 percent of the population still engages in subsistence agriculture.

The urgency of the problem is compounded by the extremely low percentage of arable land in Laos – only four percent. Laos relies mainly on the extractive industries of mining, hydropower, and timber to generate foreign currency, and the land concession grants to foreign investors that have resulted from this development model place even more strain on the capacity of Laos to feed itself. It is imperative, therefore, that the United States increases efforts to assist Laos in eliminating the estimated 75-80 million rounds of UXO that contaminate the countryside, and still kill or injure approximately 300 people each year, rendering unsafe large areas of scarce arable land.

U.S. assistance to Laos in FY 2009 resulted in the return of almost 30 square kilometers of agricultural land to productive use, positively impacting the lives of thousands in the impoverished rural areas of Laos. In addition, U.S. aid has also helped improve the technical capacity of the National Regulatory Agency (NRA) to harness resources and deliver timelier, more efficient assistance to the remote areas of the country that are most affected by UXO.

INVESTING IN PEOPLE

HIV infection in Laos is currently maintained at a low prevalence rate (0.2 percent). However, recent infrastructure development, increased tourism, continued poverty and unemployment, and increased population mobility have amplified risk factors. Alarming HIV rates among men who have sex with men (MSM) have been detected in Vientiane. At 5.6 percent, this is the highest HIV prevalence among all vulnerable groups surveyed to date in the country. Sexually transmitted infections (STI) prevalence rates among MSMs are even higher: currently reported at 42 percent. The national AIDS program Center for HIV/AIDS and STI has identified four provinces as HIV/STI “hot spots”—namely, Vientiane, Savannakhet, Champasak, and Luang Prabang. The United States works closely with the Provincial Committees for the Control of AIDS (PCCA) in these provinces, targeting the country’s two most at risk populations – MSMs and female sex workers (FSW).

Through the PCCAs, the program provided comprehensive behavior-change interventions in four hotspots for FSWs, their clients, and potential clients, focusing on condom social marketing, and outreach and peer education activities among FSWs and MSMs. Peer education activities were expanded from five to eight provinces, and new behavior-change communication interventions were developed for monthly outreach peer-education sessions. These messages are being replicated through the Global Fund for AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria (GFATM). Approximately 9,000 female sex workers were reached through outreach activities; 2,621 received STI services, and 656 received HIV/AIDS counseling and testing.

In FY 2009, the U.S. program piloted a comprehensive package of prevention services to MSMs in three hotspots, so they would be better informed about sexual and reproductive health issues and safer sex options, and increase their condom use and appropriate STI care-seeking practices. The program reached approximately 6,000 MSMs.

Male-to-female transgenders (TG) have recently been acknowledged as a high-risk group in Laos. The program this year made a concerted effort to target this group, and during the past year, more than 2,000 TGs participated in focus outreach sessions and drop-in centers activities.

Avian Influenza activities in Laos continue to focus on animal and human surveillance, the capacity of the government to respond to outbreaks, and behavior change communication. FY 2009 activities maintained laboratory capacity to identify H5N1 infections, ensured active surveillance in high-risk provinces, developed field epidemiology training programs, delivered personal protective equipment units to protect animal and human health workers during outbreaks, and integrated key communication messages into training of community leaders. To understand the risks associated with the movement of poultry, a market-chain analysis of the poultry sector was performed. An external review was conducted indicating the simplicity of the design, and support from government authorities will contribute to the model’s performance and sustainability.

Malaria activities in Laos focused on drug resistance monitoring in Luang Namtha province, and worked closely with provincial and district officials to seize illegal pharmaceutical products, and warn or fine pharmacy owners. Lao officials also received technical assistance for improving pharmaceutical management of anti-malarial drugs purchased through a GFATM grant.

The Mission’s Social Services and Protection activities in Laos strengthened 73 schools, hospitals, and disabled people’s organizations in Laos through training and support to more than 4,656 people with disabilities. This training developed the skills and confidence of Lao trainers, and enabled them

to design and carry out training programs in other provinces. The projects also trained more than 932 educators, medical staff, provincial and district officers, and community members.

For example, the trainings encouraged the Salavan hospital medical staff to learn to work as a team, to accept only high standards of medical care, to track the rates of post-surgical infection, to identify the possible reasons for high infection rates, and to lower high infection rates. When the medical team at the hospital noticed the high post-surgical infection rate among emergency surgeries, the surgeons and post-operative nurses held a meeting, discussed the possible reasons for high infection rates, and developed and implemented an aggressive plan for sterilizing the surgical room and equipment frequently. The infection rate went down to the present level of 4.3 percent.

ECONOMIC GROWTH

In February, the United States sponsored a workshop for Laos' parliamentarians to explore how to navigate and benefit from World Trade Organization (WTO) accession and Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) implementation, based in part on lessons learned from the Cambodian and Vietnamese WTO accession experience. Other project activities focused on increasing transparency through dissemination of trade-related information within the Government of Laos and to the Laos private sector. Activities included a fact sheet-writing workshop to hone Ministry of Industry and Commerce staff skills, which yielded 13 finalized trade-related fact sheets (three more than the activity target), for posting on the Foreign Trade Policy Department's new website. The workshop also hosted a seminar exploring the treatment of trading rights under the WTO and the BTA that, along with the project's translation of the draft import licensing decree, resulted in government actions to improve compliance with BTA and WTO trading rights requirements.

Other achievements include a rapid needs assessment of the Laos intellectual property (IP) regime that resulted in the Government's modification of the language in the IP Law to better comply with WTO and BTA requirements. In addition, the United States led planning of a public-private sector dialogue workshop, as well as the installment of a trade-related reading room. Project activities in the tourism sector emphasized the implementation of BTA obligations to stimulate needed reform in line with WTO principles, which will also move Laos closer to its WTO accession.