

**STATEMENT OF RAVIC R. HUSO**  
**AMBASSADOR-DESIGNATE TO**  
**THE LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC**  
**SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE**  
**May 22, 2007**

Madam Chairwoman and members of the Committee, it is a great honor to be nominated by President Bush to be the U.S. Ambassador to the Lao People's Democratic Republic. I am grateful for the President's confidence and to Secretary Rice for her support of my nomination. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee today. If confirmed, I look forward to working with the Committee and other interested members of Congress to advance U.S. interests in Laos.

Madam Chairwoman, I have served my country as a Foreign Service officer since 1980 and before that as a Peace Corps Volunteer. As the son of a Foreign Service officer, I was brought up with a deep sense of the responsibilities associated with representing the United States abroad and pride in being afforded that opportunity. I also developed a profound appreciation for the characteristics that make the United States a beacon of democratic freedom and economic opportunity.

As a Foreign Service officer, I have always looked for the most challenging assignments, those that offered the most opportunity to make a difference. If confirmed, I will devote myself to encouraging the Lao people and their government to pursue a path of positive engagement with friends and neighbors leading to enhanced respect for individual freedoms and rights and shared economic prosperity.

The U.S. relationship with Laos has developed steadily since the restoration of full diplomatic relations in 1992. The United States and Laos have many shared interests and have cooperated closely in a number of key areas, such as the recovery of the remains of our service members missing in action from the Southeast Asia war, removing unexploded ordnance from the war, and in reducing the scourge of drugs. In recent years, bilateral cooperation has broadened to include combating avian influenza and trafficking in persons. We are also slowly seeing increased opportunities for trade and investment. However, despite the recent progress in our relationship, we still have significant concerns regarding the Lao

government's inability to fully adhere to internationally recognized standards for human rights and religious freedoms.

If confirmed, I pledge to devote myself to strengthening our existing partnerships and exploring new opportunities for cooperation. I also am prepared to address our differences directly and constructively. I believe that sustained engagement with the Lao government – supported by a strong public diplomacy effort – offers the best prospects for achieving progress on the array of issues important to U.S. interests and the Lao people.

I am encouraged by progress in several important areas. The United States Government has made a solemn commitment to achieving the fullest possible accounting for the Americans still missing from the war in Southeast Asia. I deeply respect that commitment and, if confirmed, I will devote my full attention to building on the long history of successful cooperation on this important humanitarian endeavor that has been at the foundation of our bilateral relationship. I believe that we can achieve even more through increased flexibility in the conduct of joint field recovery activities and renewed efforts to examine all available sources of relevant information.

This collaborative work has also laid the foundation for taking the first steps in a process of building military-to-military ties through English-language training, educational exchanges and civic action projects. I believe a phased and graduated approach to greater contacts between our militaries has the potential to improve mutual understanding and also benefit the Lao people.

The Congress took a major step in 2004 toward helping Laos to achieve sustainable, free market-based economic development by approving normal trade relations (NTR) status. Laos is among the poorest nations in Asia but also has significant economic potential and untapped natural as well as human resources. American investors and companies can play an important role in helping Laos to prosper and to diversify its economic and trade relations. If confirmed, I will not only assist U.S. businesses seeking to trade with or invest in Laos but will also look for ways to help the Lao government fully implement our Bilateral Trade Agreement and undertake the reforms necessary to strengthen the essential underpinnings of a market economy: good governance and rule of law.

I also assess a commitment by the Lao government to work together toward solving challenges of mutual concern. The United States and Laos have a common interest in combating transnational threats such as terrorism, trafficking in narcotics and persons, money laundering and other financial crimes, pandemic diseases and environmental degradation. Laos has made great progress in reducing the production of opium and the illicit cross-border trade in heroin but is faced with a rapidly growing new threat, the use and trafficking of methamphetamines -- known locally as *yaa baa* or “crazy drug.” I will do my utmost to sustain the progress made against opium and while also broadening our focus to address the methamphetamine challenge.

Earlier this year, Laos suffered an outbreak of avian influenza, resulting in its first-ever human infections and deaths from this disease. I will pay close attention to bolstering U.S. and international efforts to assist the Lao to develop their capabilities to detect, isolate, and control such outbreaks and reduce the threat of human pandemic influenza.

Porous borders and weak state institutions make Laos potentially vulnerable to terrorist activity. I will also urge the Lao government to work closely with the United States and other partner countries, as well as within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) framework, to take concrete measures to reduce the threat of international terrorists using Laos a base or a target for their crimes.

If confirmed, I would undertake this position with an overall sense of real opportunity to interact with the Lao government to effect positive change and further expand the solid basis for cooperation. At the same time, I am attuned to and intend to forthrightly address the Lao government’s poor record regarding human rights.

In particular, I appreciate and fully share the concerns of the many thousands of Americans who trace their origins to Laos – in particular, the Hmong-Americans – over the Lao government’s treatment of ethnic minorities. Many of the Hmong in Laos, especially those who live in remote areas in often difficult conditions, are regarded with suspicion and sometimes hostility by officials who suspect they may be associated with anti-government activities. Significant numbers of Hmong have entered Thailand in search of economic opportunities or, in some cases, out of well-founded fear of persecution, and are now in detention awaiting a determination as to their future. I will make it a priority, if confirmed, to

work with the Lao and Thai authorities and appropriate international agencies to find durable solutions to the plight of the displaced Hmong. I will also work steadfastly to encourage the Lao government to respect the rights of its minority ethnic groups and provide those who may return as well as those who have stayed with the protection and assistance they need to integrate fully into Lao society. At the same time, I will be guided by longstanding U.S. policy that we do not support or condone groups or individuals who advocate or take actions aimed at overthrowing or destabilizing the Lao government.

More broadly, if confirmed, I intend to sustain the U.S. commitment to human rights and democratic principles as my primary vehicle for encouraging positive change in Laos. I will press the Lao government on human rights issues and encourage them to adhere to international human rights standards. I will also devote particular effort to building on the progress made in recent years by the Lao government in meeting international standards for religious freedom and tolerance.

Finally, the welfare and safety of American citizens traveling or working in Laos will always be a top priority if I am confirmed. I will ensure that the U.S. mission in Laos provides accurate and timely information on any risks American may face in Laos along with advice on precautions they should take. I also intend to see through the construction of a new Embassy that meets current security standards and provides a safe working environment for the dedicated and highly capable American and Lao staff of the U.S. mission.

Madam Chairwoman and members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to address you. I am prepared to respond to any questions you may have.