

**Opening Statement by
H.E. Dr. Chaleun Yiapaohou, Minister of Justice,
Head of the Lao Delegation to the Examination of the combined
16th-18th periodic reports of the Lao PDR at the Eightieth Session of
The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination,
28 February 2012, Geneva, Switzerland**

Mr. Chairman, Honorable Committee Members,

On behalf of the Government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, I have the honour and pleasure, together with other members of the Lao delegation, to attend the Examination by the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination of the combined 16th – 18th National Reports of the Lao PDR under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). First of all, please allow me introduce the members of the Lao Delegation to this 80th session of the CERD Committee, who are representatives from different ministries and agencies.

- H.E. Mr. Yong Chanthalangsy, Lao ethnic group, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Permanent Representative of the Lao PDR to the United Nations Offices and Other International Organizations in Geneva, Deputy Head of Delegation;
- Honorable Mr. Khamsao Kayson, Hmong ethnic group, Vice-Chairman of the Ethnic Affairs Committee, Member of National Assembly, Member;
- Ambassador Ouan Phommachack, Lao ethnic group, Director General, Department of Treaties and Law, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Member;
- Mr. Khonepheng Thamavong, Minister Counselor, Lao ethnic group, Deputy Permanent Representative of the Lao PDR to the United Nations Offices and Other International Organizations at Geneva, Member;
- Mr. Sosonephith Phanouvong, Lao ethnic group, Director General, Department of Ethnic Affairs, Lao Front for National Construction, Member;
- Mr. Nalonglith Norasing, Lao ethnic group, Director General, Department of International Cooperation and Relations, Ministry of Justice, Member;
- Mrs. Yangxia Lee, Director, Hmong ethnic group, Inclusive Education Center, Ministry of Education and Sports, Member;
- Mr. Vongvilay Thiphalangsy, Lao ethnic group, Director, Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law, Department of Treaties and Law, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Member;

- Mr. Douangmany Gnotsyoudom, Lao ethnic group, Deputy Director, Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law, Department of Treaties and Law, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Member;
- Mr. Phasouk Nanthanlangsy, Lao ethnic group Officer, Division of Human Right and International Humanitarian Law, Department of Treaties and Law, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Member;
- Mr. Sengpraathird Snookphone, Lao ethnic group, Assistant Project Manager of the International Law Project, Department of Treaties and Law, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Member,

And myself, Dr. Chaleun Yiapaoheu, Hmong ethnic group, Minister of Justice and Chairman of the National Committee on Reporting under ICERD.

The high level of delegation to this session reflects the great importance the Government has always attached to the implementation of this important human rights treaty.

Mr. Chairman, Honorable Committee Members,

The Lao PDR became a party to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in 1974. The Lao PDR has attached importance to the implementation of this convention. Since then the initial to 15th reports on the implementation of this Convention have been submitted to and examined by the CERD Committee.

The Lao Government has put all efforts in the implementation of the last Concluding Observations and Recommendations adopted by the CERD Committee on its national reports in 2005. I would like to inform the Committee that the Concluding Observations and Recommendations have been translated into the Lao language, officially published and widely disseminated among officials at the central and local levels. As a result of the efforts undertaken by the Government, most of the recommendations have been or in the progress of implementation. New laws, amendments to existing laws have taken into account the obligations under the Convention. The Criminal Law amended in 2005, for example, includes an offence on discrimination based on ethnicity (Article 176). In 2009, the President of the Lao PDR issued a Presidential Ordinance on the Conclusion, Ratification and Implementation of Treaties in the Lao PDR. This Ordinance provides fundamental principles for harmonization between domestic laws and international conventions which the Lao PDR is the Party to that provides the criteria for harmonization of the national laws and international treaties. In case of the contradiction between the national laws and international convention, the provisions of the international convention will prevail and the prevalence should be consistent with the Constitution of the Lao PDR.

On the basis of the achievement of the previous periodic reports and Committee's Concluding Observations and Recommendations, the Lao

Government has prepared the combined 16th -18th reports, which contains updates on the progress made in the implementation of the Convention for the period under review during 2006-2011.

The reports are a product of the national consultations which were participated by government ministries, mass organizations, social and media organizations, academics, local administrations as well as the representatives of different ethnic groups. For the purpose of preparing the national reports, the Lao Government set up a National Committee on Reporting on the implementation of ICERD, which is chaired by Minister of Justice and composed of members who are representatives of concerned Government agencies and institutions as well as mass organizations. In the preparation process for the reports, the Committee organized workshops, seminars at the central and provincial levels to gather necessary data and information. The National Committee finalized its assignment in 2010 and the Government approved the reports which then were together with the Common Core Document submitted to the CERD Committee in early 2011. On behalf of the Lao Government, I would like to convey our sincere apologies for our inability to meet the deadline of submission of the reports as advised by the Committee which was due mainly to the limited experienced personnel and financial resource.

The combined 16th-18th Reports provides an extensive account on the achievements the Lao PDR has made in the implementation of ICERD, particularly in the context of measures taken to implement the substantive rights and principles under Article 1 to Article 8 of the Convention. I would like to express our sincere thanks to the Committee for the written questions that were communicated to us prior to this meeting which together with the reports constitute a basis for an interactive dialogue between the Government and the CERD Committee on this important occasion.

I would like to highlight the following areas contained in the reports to the Committee.

Measures Guaranteeing Equality

By Constitution and laws, the Lao government prohibits racial discrimination and guarantees the equality of all individuals before the law without distinction as to race or ethnicity.

Equal Treatment before the Courts and other Organs administering Justice

All Lao citizens have the right to equal treatment before the courts and other organs administering justice. Article 41 of the Constitution, Article 4 (1) of Law on People's Court, The Civil Procedure Law (Article 3 (1)) and Article

5 (1) mention about equal treatment before the courts and other organs administering justice.

The right to physical inviolability

Lao citizens are guaranteed the right to physical inviolability. This right is guaranteed by the Constitution and laws. Articles 6 and 42 of the Constitution and Article 5 of the Criminal Procedure Law provide this right for Lao citizens.

Freedom of movement and residence within the territory of the Lao PDR

Lao people of all ethnic groups enjoy freedom of movement and residence within the Lao PDR. In the Constitution, Article 40 provides that "*Lao citizens enjoy freedom of residence and movement in accordance with the law*". In accordance with this provision, there is neither restriction nor barriers on the movement of people within the borders of the country. People are free to choose the place of residence suitable to their abilities and their personal circumstances, but it shall be in line with the Constitution and related laws.

To provide the favourable conditions to implement the equality right and freedoms, the Government of the Lao PDR adopted the policy on rural development in all aspects focusing on poverty eradication and reduction of economic gaps. For this purpose, the Government is implementing a relocation policy (Prime Minister's Decree No 07/PM dated 9 April 2004) through moving people from remote, mountainous areas where they used to live in a nomadic manner to new villages with infrastructure such as schools, hospitals, land for cultivation, roads, electricity, clean water and market access. The relocation policy is aimed at creating favourable conditions for smaller ethnic groups to improve their livelihood in a sustainable manner. The establishment of development villages and development cluster villages is a crucial component in the poverty reduction programmes undertaken by the Government. This helps to advance the efforts to put an end to slash-and-burn cultivation in the mountainous areas that has an adverse impact on the environment.

The government of the Lao PDR is well aware that the establishment of development villages and cluster villages in the rural areas affect the traditional livelihood of the people in the mountainous areas. The Government therefore pays great attention to create understanding among such groups by various means including dissemination of the policy so that they are voluntarily participating in the implementation.

The implementation of the relocation policy has proved progressively successful. 679 projects were implemented on the national budgets and financial supports by the international communities. In the implementation of the National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy, the Government is striving

to provide assistance and development to remote and mountainous areas with a view to improving the living conditions of the smaller ethnic groups, including the Hmong, the programs of development are being implemented in 64 focusing zones in order to build the model-towns in the rural areas. The facts about this development are illustrated in the ICERD/C/LAO/CO/15/Add.1 page 8, for instance, Viengthong District is one of the most poorest and isolated district of the Boulikhamxay province; the village cluster called Shoupna and Khokham in Vieingthong District, where the Hmong ethic group live and majority of them are practiced the slash and burn agriculture. The people living in those districts and villages have new houses, secured foods, the electricity, safe drinking waters, permanent works and business activities, schools for their children and health care centres, as the result, they are enjoying their new lives.

Freedom to leave and to return to one's country

Under article 40 of the Constitution, "*Lao citizens have the right to leave the country and return to it legally*". Laws and regulations of the Lao PDR set forth favourable conditions for the Lao citizens to exit the country without hindrance. Since early 2007, Lao citizens holding ordinary passports do not have to obtain an exit visa from the concerned authorities (before, it was necessary to obtain such a visa). Moreover, to facilitate cross-border movement of Lao citizens, international border-checkpoints, local checkpoints and traditional checkpoints have been increased in numbers. In addition, the Government has concluded agreements on visa exemption with a number of foreign countries, including all ASEAN members. Lao citizens have the freedom to return to their home country. The Government places no restrictions on such return. In fact a great number of people from smaller ethnic groups who are still Lao citizens or hold foreign citizenships visit their homeland every year and especially during the time of festivities celebrated by smaller ethnic groups such as the Hmong and other ethnic groups.

Right to Nationality

The right to nationality is provided in the Constitution as given in the previous report. The Law on Lao Nationality stipulates that "*Lao nationality is a legal and political bond between a person and the Lao People's Democratic Republic which reflects the rights and obligations of Lao citizens before the state of the Lao PDR and the rights and responsibilities of the state of the Lao PDR for Lao citizens. An individual holding Lao nationality is a Lao citizen*" (Article 2). In the Lao PDR all Lao people regardless of their ethnicity hold Lao citizenship. The Law also provides for the reduction of statelessness by improving the procedures for acquiring Lao nationality. The law defines equal rights between mother and father in acquiring nationality for their children

irrespective of the basis of acquisition of Lao nationality by either parent: by birth or through legal procedure.

Right to marriage

The right to marriage of Lao citizens is defined in the Law on Family. Article 3 provides that “*Men and women who have attained the age of marriage have the right to marry on the basis of mutual consent, freedom and love. It is forbidden to force or hinder other individual’s marriage.*” There is no legal prohibition against mixed ethnic marriages. Lao PDR’s citizens can freely choose their spouses and in fact there have been many cases that members of one ethnic group married members of other ethnic groups. In such mixed ethnic families, children may identify themselves as members of the mothers’ or the fathers’s ethnic groups.

Right to own property individually as well as in association with others

The Constitution and laws guarantee the right to ownership of property individually as well as in association with others. In terms of land ownership, the government attaches importance to the land title process. The Land Titling Project implemented by the National Land Administration has produced tangible results ensuring that all Lao people have the right to own land. There is no discrimination based on race or ethnicity in the official certification of land ownership. A person of any ethnicity can own land which is certified in the land-title document.

Right to inherit

The right to inherit is guaranteed by the Law on Inheritance in the Lao PDR. In the Lao PDR, inheritance traditions vary from one ethnic group to another.

The Lao PDR notes that there is an imbalance in property ownership and inheritance rights that favour men in such ethnic groups. However, in accordance with international obligations the State respects the cultural values and traditions of each ethnic group and allows their continuation until such a time when the ethnic groups themselves have developed to the extent that they can adjust their cultural practices to be in line with the government’s policy promoting gender equality. This will happen through education, awareness raising and implementation of poverty alleviation programmes.

Freedom of thought, conscience and religion; Freedom of opinion and expression; Freedom of peaceful assembly and association

Lao people of all ethnic groups enjoy freedoms of thought, conscience and religion which are guaranteed by the Constitution and laws of the Lao PDR. Article 9 of the Constitution states that *"The State respects and protects all lawful activities of Buddhists and of followers of other religions, mobilises and encourages the Buddhist monks, novices and priests of other faiths to participate in those activities which are beneficial to the country and its people. All acts of fomenting division among religions and among the people are prohibited"*. And Article 43 stipulates that *"Lao citizens have the right and freedom to believe or not to believe in religions"*. These are main principles as provided for in the Constitution has been translated into the Prime Minister's Decree No 92/PM on Management and Protection of Religious Activities in the Lao PDR.

Under Article 23, paragraphs 3 and 4, of the Constitution, *"The State attends to improving and expanding mass media activities for the purpose of national protection and development. All cultural and mass media activities which are detrimental to national interests or the fine traditional culture and dignity of Lao people are prohibited."* The National Assembly adopted the Law on Mass Media which has become the legal basis of expanded opportunities for Lao people of all ethnic groups to equally enjoy the right to information and freedom of expression.

Freedom of opinion and expression as well as freedom of assembly, association, is guaranteed by the Constitution to all Lao people irrespective of their ethnicity. Any acts violating these freedoms are criminally punishable. The amended Criminal Law has provisions on this subject matter. The National Assembly also adopted the Law on Trade Unions to regulate the formation and operations of trade unions. As reported in the Common Core Document, the Government adopted a Decree on Associations which sets out substantive and procedural regulations for the formation and operations of existing as well as future associations.

Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

The Rights to work, to choose their employments as well as to be secured their employment, and to have fair remunerations are guaranteed in the Constitution and laws of the Lao PDR. The Lao Government has always paid particular attention to the creation of employment opportunities for the multiethnic peoples of Laos to improve their living conditions. Employment in production units in the public or private sectors insures equal opportunities for people of all ethnic backgrounds without discrimination.

In most major development and investment projects particularly in the provinces people from smaller ethnic groups were given the priority in employment. Thus for example, the Xepon Mining Project employs 91% of

Lao nationals of whom 60 % are from the immediate vicinities of the project. The Phoubia Mining Project pursues a similar policy providing employment for the local ethnic people.

Right to form and join trade unions

The Constitution provides for freedom to form associations (Article 44). Together with the constitutional provision, the Labour Law, the Law on Trade Unions and the Prime Minister's Decree No. 98/PM of 14 December 1995 constitute a legal basis for all Lao people to form and join trade unions irrespective of their ethnicity. At the time of writing this report, there are 105, 541 trade unions members throughout the country of which 36,315 are women, representing people from all ethnic groups in the Lao PDR. The previous chairman of Lao Federation of Trade Unions was from Hmong ethnic group, and the current one is from Tai-Dam ethnic group.

Right to housing

The provisions of the Constitution and the Prime Minister's Decree No. 194/PM of 12 November 1994 as detailed in the previous report are still applicable in the Lao PDR. In implementing this policy, the land law defines the right to own land by a Lao citizen. A Lao individual is entitled to own 800 square meters of housing land, 2 hectares of farming land, 3 hectares of gardening land and 15 hectares for livestock. The Government has provided housing and land for civil servants within the constraints of the State budget. Moreover, in the national socio-economic development plans, and particularly in the rural development programmes, government policy is designed to eliminate poverty for the multi-ethnic people, narrow the gap between urban and rural areas, distribute income to the disadvantaged and improve the quality of life of the multi-ethnic people.

The Right to public health, medical care, social security and social services

The Constitution, the Law on Hygiene, Disease Prevention and Health Promotion and the Prime Minister's Decree No. 207/PM of 23 December 1999, as provided in the previous report, are still relevant and applicable at the present time. Article 3 of the Law on Hygiene, Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (2001) states that "*All citizens, regardless of ethnic origin, gender, age, or socio-economic status, have the right of access to health services, and have the obligation to care for personal, family, social and national health, and to contribute to hygiene, disease prevention and health promotion*". Article 22 of the Law on the Development and Protection of Women also states that "*It is prohibited for individuals or organizations to force a pregnant woman to deliver [her] baby in the forest, or a remote place; it is prohibited to hurt women and children because of superstitious beliefs or other reasons*".

The Government continues the policy on mother and child health that from 2011-2015, the pregnant women can deliver their babies at the public hospitals free of charges; and children at age under 5 years old have right to be cured in the public hospitals free of charges.

In the Social Security sphere, the Lao PDR has made progress in serving working people. Public and private social security funds have been established for all. The Prime Ministerial Decree No. 207/PM of 23 December 1999, on Social Security Scheme for company employees, stipulates that *“the social security scheme for company employees is based on the principle of insurance policies underwritten by the State. Employees and employers are required to participate in the compulsory social security scheme and are not allowed to enter into agreements that would allow them to evade this requirement. Employees and employers outside the compulsory social security scheme may apply for membership of it, but assume the same rights and duties as those within the system”* (Article 2). *“The following benefits are covered by the scheme: funeral allowance, allowance for medical treatment, sickness benefit, maternity benefit, benefits for industrial injury or work-related illness, disability benefit, retirement pension, survivors’ benefit, child benefit and unemployment benefit”* (Article 5).

Right to education and training

The right to education without racial and ethnic discrimination is guaranteed in the Constitution. Article 22 of the 2003 Constitution provides that *“The State attends to developing education and implements compulsory primary education in order to build good citizens with revolutionary competence, knowledge and abilities.”* *“The State and society attend to developing high quality national education, to create opportunities and favourable conditions in education for all people throughout the country, especially people in remote areas, ethnic groups, women and disadvantaged children.”* According to Article 38 of the Constitution *“Lao citizens have the right to receive education and upgrade themselves.”* The Government promotes and encourages the private sector investment in the development of national education. Law on Education (2007) defines and provides the favourable conditions to all ethnic groups to access to the education particularly the people living in the rural and remote areas, women, girls, children and disadvantages children; the law stresses on the equal rights of the students, particularly the girls and ethnic groups to access to education and policy to support and encourage those students to have more opportunities to education. This is the policy of the Lao PDR to fulfill its commitment to the policy **‘Education For All’**.

To ensure the implementation of policies and laws effectively, the Government established the Inclusive education centre in 2008, one of our delegation, Mrs. Yangxia Lee, Director is the Director of Inclusive Education

Center. The network of the inclusive education established also in the educational level from the Centre to the provinces and districts.

The government of the Lao PDR attaches importance to and has adopted a special policy on promoting education for people of small ethnic groups and in the remote areas by establishing ethnic primary and secondary schools in all provinces throughout the country. In 2010, the Government adopted and issued the Prime Minister's Decree on the National Strategy on Inclusive Education to facilitate, encourage and provide the qualified education to all ethnic groups in remote areas by different measures such as building of new primary and secondary schools, special schools for the ethnic groups in the country and offer the government scholarships to the children from the poor ethnic groups and disadvantaged children. The inclusive education in the Lao PDR is now well-know and recognized as good programs in the regional and international forums.

During physical year 2010-2011, the total numbers of the students at the general education from the kindergartens to the upper secondary schools were 1,491,691 students, in which 925,432 students from the Lao-Tai ethno-linguistic group, 37,479 students from the China-Tibet ethno-linguistic group, 353,838 from the Mon-Khmer ethno-linguistic group, 172,244 students from Hmong-Imien ethno-linguistic group.

Right to equal participation in cultural activities

Under the Lao PDR Constitution "*Citizens of both genders enjoy equal rights in the political, economic, cultural and social fields and in family affairs.*" (Article 37) and "*to create artistic and literary works [;] and to engage in cultural activities which are not contrary to the laws.*" (Article 45); "*All ethnic groups have the right to protect, preserve and promote the fine customs and cultures of their own tribes and of the nation.*" (Article 8).

The government has a clear cultural policy which has been designed to promote cultural development in order to build a harmonious society. Guided by this policy, the Government has paid particular attention to protecting national culture by maintaining and promoting highly valued ethnic cultural traditions and related cultural attributes and artifacts. Particular emphasis has been put on the promotion of the fine arts, literature and performing arts, handicrafts, traditional weavings, pottery, carvings, paintings, and silver and gold artworks of national significance and uniqueness.

The Lao people of all ethnic groups have the equal right to participate in the cultural life of the country without any discrimination as to race and ethnic origin. The Lao government pays a great attention to the participation of people of all ethnic groups in cultural activities organised by local communities in which different ethnic groups participate, opening the opportunity for ethnic people to preserve their customs, languages and dialects in concert with each

other ethnic groups. The preservation of the culture of all ethnic groups, large and small is recognised by the government as a driving force for the development and preservation of national identity in the country. The ethnic groups have inspired writers, poets and composers.

Right of access to public places or services, such as transport, hotels, restaurants, cafes, theatres and parks

The Lao People's Democratic Republic has no laws or regulations denying any race or ethnicity to have access to such public places or services. Such places and services are open to all without discrimination of any kind. All ethnic groups have equal access to any place or service intended for use by the general public, such as means of transport, hotels, restaurants, cafes, theatres and parks. The government attaches importance to the preservation of historical relics, especially those recognized as national and world heritage sites.

Mr Chairman, Honorable Committee Members

As part of the measures to implement the Convention, the Lao Government has adopted appropriate measures in education, dissemination on human rights, including ICERD which I would like to summarize as follows:

Regarding to Educational Curriculum, the Primary and secondary schools' curriculum always reflect the fact and the national pride that the Lao PDR is a multiethnic nation. Each ethnic group has their own distinct customs and traditions. The government's educational and training policy aims at educating citizens to become good, patriotic and cultural citizens willing to make sacrifices for the cause of national defense and development; to promote and respect unity and harmony among all ethnic groups; and to preserve the cultures and traditions of ethnic groups and those of the nation.

Mass media play a crucial part in the ensuring equality and non-discrimination among ethnic groups in the Lao PDR. The Constitution and Law on Mass Media form legal a basis for the expanded and strengthened mass media both owned by the State as well as privately owned. Most provinces, administrative offices and organizations have their own newsletters, magazines and newspapers. Through the mass media, the government has increased its efforts in distributing information on the constitution, laws, regulations as well as the international treaties to which the Lao PDR is a party among the people of all ethnic groups, especially those living in the remote and mountainous areas. Radio broadcasting programmes suitable to their traditions and lifestyles have been the focus of the government information programs. Radio and TV programmes broadcast in Hmong and in Khmu dialects. Up to the time of writing this report, the radio programmes in the ethnic tongues cover more 80% of the country.

Information on human rights, objectives and principles of the international human rights instruments to which the Lao PDR is a party, are disseminated through seminars, workshops at the central and local levels, the national radio and television stations broadcast special programmes on the occasions of International Children's Day, International Women's Day, United Nations Day, Human Rights Day, and other important international events. Details of the work on awareness rising and the promotion of human rights are contained in the Common Core Document

The Constitution and Laws of the Lao PDR as well as the human rights treaties to which the Lao PDR is party have been widely disseminated amongst ethnic groups, especially by the NA deputies in their constituencies. The Law Faculty of the National University of Laos and other educational institutions such as the National Academy of Politics and Administration, the National Police Academy, the National Defense Academy has incorporated human rights in their curricula.

Mr. Chairman, Honorable Committee Members,

The Lao PDR is one of ethnically diverse nations in South East Asia and the World. In the country there are 49 ethnic groups living together in peace and harmony. In the past, 3 large groups were recognised such as Lao Theung, Lao Sung, Lao Lum. The classification of ethnic groups in Laos into such large 3 groups during that time had the purpose of uniting all Lao people in the struggle for national independence but such classification was not scientifically correct and did not reflect the reality of ethnic diversity in the country. Therefore, the Government had launched an anthropological research on ethnic groups in Laos in which researchers, academics, anthropologists, representatives of various ethnic groups had participated. In 2008 the National Assembly adopted the outcome of the research which scientifically classifies ethnic groups in Laos into 4 larger ethno-linguistic groups comprising 49 smaller ethnic groups.

All ethnic groups in Laos are equal under the Constitution and laws. The Constitution and the laws, as well as Government policies encourage solidarity among all ethnic groups and condemns all kinds of discrimination, including on the basis of their gender, social status, education, beliefs and ethnic groups. The Lao Government upholds the principle of equality of all persons before the law and equal protection of the law in building a Rule of Law State that promotes and protects human rights. The Lao Government's human rights policy is rooted in the nation values, the morals of the Lao people, the country historical, cultural realities, consistent with the international obligations and commitments assumed by the country. National independence and development, well-being and prosperity of the Lao multi-ethnic people, their inherent human dignity and inalienable rights and freedoms have always been at the core of the Lao Government's policy on human rights.

In order to ensure prosperity and well-being of the Lao multi-ethnic people, the Lao Government has implemented socio-economic development strategies and plans. As a result, significant achievements were recorded over the period under review. For instance, the economic growth rate averaged at 7% annually; per capita income reached \$905 in 2009, and \$1050 in 2010 compared to less than \$100 in the 1970s. Poverty rate decreased from 49% in 1990 to about 25% in 2009. Currently, there are about 300 poorest villages and the poorest families are accounted for 18 %. In the social sector, progress was recorded in the school enrolment which reached 91.6 %; literacy rate of people aged above 15 was 77.09 %; under five child mortality rate dropped to 98 per 1,000 live births; infant mortality rate decreased to 70 per 1,000 births. Maternal mortality rate decreased to 405 deaths per 100,000 births; and life expectancy rose to over 60 years compared to about 50 years in 1995.

Mr. Chairman, Honorable Committee Members,

The combined 16th -18th reports of the Lao PDR were submitted to the CERD Committee before the major events in the political, economic, social and cultural spheres of the country took place in 2011. I would like to note especially the IX Party Congress, the Election to the National Assembly 7th Legislature, the improvement of the Government structure and administration, the Celebration of 60th Anniversary of the Lao Front for National Construction, the adoption of the VII National Socio-Economic Development Plan, the adoption of new laws by the National Assembly, etc.

In regards to the ethnic policy, the IX Party Congress reaffirms the consistent ethnic policy in the Lao PDR with a view to further enhancing the equality and solidarity among all ethnic groups so that they make more and more contributions to the national development. The VII National Socio-Economic Development (2011-2015) has the purpose of achieving the Millennium Development Goals by 2015 and paving a firm foundation for the country to graduate from the LDC status. The Plan ensures that the Lao people of all ethnic groups are at the center of all development activities, being both the participants and beneficiaries of development. This new National Socio-Economic Development Plan is aimed at eradicating poverty, narrowing the disparities between urban and rural, remote areas, improving living conditions of the people so that the benefits of the development are equitably distributed among all the Lao multi-ethnic people, including the ethnic groups living in the remote, mountainous areas.

The election to the National Assembly VII Legislature was one of the most important events in the political life of the nation. The election was held based on the principles of universal, equal and direct suffrage and secret ballot. Hundreds of candidates including representatives from ethnic groups contested in the election. The National Assembly VII Legislature has 132 members of whom 75% (99 persons) are from the Lao-Tai ethno-linguistic group, 3,80% (5

persons) from the China-Tibet ethno-linguistic group, 5,30% (7 persons) from Hmong-Imien ethno-linguistic group, and 15,90% (7 persons) from the Mon-Khmer ethno-linguistic group. The number of female deputies has also increased to 33 persons or 25% of the total number of the National Assembly Members. Significantly the President of the National Assembly is a female from Hmong ethnic group. Also, the Chairman of National Public Security and Defense, Vice-Chairman of Ethnic Affairs Committee and Vice-Chairman of Culture-Society Committee are Hmong ethnic groups. The increased proportion of representatives of ethnic groups in the National Assembly which is the highest organ of state powers reflects the free exercise by all ethnic groups in Laos of their constitutional democratic rights to choose their representatives on the National Assembly to represent, protect and promote their legitimate rights and interests. The Committee on Ethnic Affairs of the National Assembly functions to ensure the translation of the Party policy on ethnic affairs into legislation and the consistency of such legislation with the national Constitution. The Committee also has an oversight function on the implementation of the Constitution and laws by the Government from the ethnic policy perspective.

One among the most important institutions in ensuring the equality, non-discrimination, harmony and unity among ethnic groups in Laos is the Lao Front for National Construction which in 2010 celebrated its 60th anniversary. The LFNC is a political alliance organization that unites and mobilizes all ethnic groups, people of all strata to take part in the tasks of national defense and development, to enhance the people's right to mastery of the country and to protect the legitimate rights and interests of its members. In the celebration of the 60th anniversary of LFNC representatives of all ethnic groups in Laos as well as more than 100 oversea Lao living in foreign countries took part.

The ethnic policy is a cross cutting issue relevant to all sectors of the society. Today, an increasing number of representatives of ethnic groups hold high positions in the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, National Assembly, Government and the Judiciary. Following the election to the National Assembly in April 2011, the Government has undergone institutional reforms, merging ministries, agencies, and establishing new ministries. The most relevant newly established institution is the Ministry of Home Affairs which has a Department of Ethnic and Religious Affairs. This new Department is designated to be the Government's focal point on ethnic and religious issues to complement, on the Government's part, the work of the Lao Front for National Construction and the National Assembly Ethnic Affairs Committee.

The Lao Government has concentrated all efforts to improve the country's legal environment in order to be conducive to the national socio-economic development and to further enhancing the promotion and protection of human rights and people's democracy. In 2009 the Government adopted the Legal Sector Master Plan which sets out a vision to build a Rule of Law State

by 2020. Reforms in the governance sector were undertaken as a top priority to ensure a transparent, accountable and participatory system in providing better public services to the people. Today, the Lao multi-ethnic people enjoy their rights and freedoms and are equal before the law and the court. The court system also underwent reforms. Judicial independence has been gradually strengthened to ensure a fair trial and due process of law, whereas the capacity and skills of judges, lawyers and law enforcement officers were enhanced to better perform their respective functions and duties.

In building a Rule of Law State in people's democracy the Lao Government places importance on the traditional values inherited by different ethnic groups in Laos over generations. The Ministry of Justice recently has conducted a survey on customary rules of all 49 ethnic groups in Laos to identify their traditions and customs which complement the effort to build a Rule of Law state. Customary rules adhered to and practiced by ethnic groups that are consistent with the Lao PDR's international human rights obligations, are the basis for further development of the informal justice system in Laos with the central part played by village mediation committees that decide trivial cases. In this effort, the Ministry of Justice has paid great attention to the development of grassroots justice system through wide dissemination of laws to all ethnic groups with the aim to create awareness of laws in the society and conditions to vulnerable groups access to legal service and justice.

Mr. Chairman, Honorable Committee Members,

The foregoing is testimony to the tireless efforts, consistent policies and affirmative actions undertaken by the Lao Government in the implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination over the period under review and beyond.

In this endeavors, the Lao Government received meaningful support and cooperation from international development partners for which, on behalf of the Lao Government, once again I would like to express our deep appreciation.

Nevertheless, the efforts of the Government were not free from challenges and obstacles. In addition, the Lao Government has paid attention to implement international conventions that the Lao PDR is a party. As you are well aware some groups of ill-intentioned people have tried to distort the goodwill of the Lao Government in fulfilling its obligations under the ICERD through creating a wrong picture about the Lao PDR. Some ill-intentioned groups sent different kinds of fabricated, baseless communications and reports to the CERD Committee and to other procedures under the Human Rights Council. The Lao Government has condemned to those actions and thus far extended its good cooperation with the CERD Committee and other procedures by providing factual information, clarifications, explanations which helped create a proper understanding of the realities in the country and revealed the ill-intention of such groups of people. The most important proof of this truth is the

recent decision of the Working Group on Situations of the Complaint Procedure of the UN Human Rights Council to discontinue the consideration of communication No. G/SO.215/1 LAO 34, pursuant to paragraph 109 (2) of the Council resolution.

Mr. Chairman, Honorable Committee Members,

The allegation on maltreatment and discrimination against ethnic groups especially the Hmong ethnic group in the Lao PDR as provided in the communications and reports sent by the ill-intentioned groups to the Committee is not only groundless but also aimed at destroying the good image and reputation of the Lao PDR in the international arena amid the country's continuing efforts to cooperate with the international community in the promotion and protection of human rights. The Lao PDR is now one of the leading nations in signing and ratifying UN core Human Rights Treaties. The country is currently in the process of national implementation of the UPR recommendations and the recommendations under other human rights treaties such as CEDAW and CRC.

We are very much expected that through a constructive and frank dialogue with Committee Members and we do hope that the outcomes of this meeting would help us to further progress the implement the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

Thank you for your kind attention.