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Telephone:

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From the Secretary of State

The Rt Hon Tony Blair MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
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1 April 2001

Dear Tony,

IRAQ POLICY REVIEW

Summary: Welcome review of discredited sanctions policy and proposed refocus on military controls. Oil for food programme should end except for Kurds in northern Iraq. To counter real risk that Saddam will neglect his people's needs we should promote openness and active role for UN Agencies, Red Cross and NGOs in reporting on humanitarian situation. UK should be ready to play a leading role in holding Saddam to account.

Detail

My Private Secretary wrote to John Sawers on 15 March, noting DFID's close interest in the policy review of Iraq and my concern that we should fully consider the impact on the people of Iraq of any change of approach.

I have since given further thought to these issues. I welcome the decision to review the old sanctions policy which is widely discredited and is steadily eroding. The oil for food programme has provided considerable relief for the people of Iraq but has been manipulated by Saddam Hussein. He has been very adept in shifting blame from himself to us for the suffering of his people. I therefore endorse the proposed approach set out in John Sawers' letter of 7 March to Sherard Cowper-Coles which aims to refocus attention on controls on weapons of mass destruction and away from any sanctions which are perceived to harm ordinary people.

Such an approach would lead to the end of the oil for food programme in Baghdad-controlled Iraq; but it would be important to retain the programme in the North, which would otherwise be left to fend completely for itself by Saddam. We would also move to an agreed list of military (and related) supplies which Iraq would be prohibited from importing. Outside this list, Iraq would have freedom on how it spent its oil revenues, although these revenues would still be held in a UN controlled escrow account.

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We would need to give a clear explanation

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We would need to give a clear explanation of this change of policy, emphasising that the sanctions that were now being applied to Saddam were military sanctions. (We should avoid the term 'smart' sanctions, which means little to most people).

We should make clear that this change places the responsibility for the welfare of all Iraqi people where it belongs - on Saddam Hussein's shoulders - and to hold him to account in the UN and other international fora if he defaults on his responsibilities.

There is of course a real risk that with greater freedom in the use of oil revenues, Saddam will neglect his people's needs even more, and continue to blame us for the suffering caused by this neglect. To counter this it will be important to foster as much openness and access to information as possible about the situation in Iraq. Once the existing UN monitors have left, I see a key role for the Red Cross/Red Crescent and the representatives of the remaining UN agencies (especially UNICEF, WHO and the World Food Programme) in providing objective reporting of the situation on the ground. We should aim to maximise their presence and, with the end of oil for food procedures, press them to adopt a much more positive and pro-active approach. I would be ready, in due course, to write to the heads of the relevant agencies to urge them to play an energetic part in making a success of the new arrangements.

There will continue to be particular difficulties in ensuring that adequate humanitarian supplies reach the Kurds in northern Iraq. The Iraq Government will have little inclination to look after their needs, but for reasons of sovereignty the Government will not voluntarily allow the UN to manage the programme on its behalf; nor would other members of the UN Security Council and Arab States be willing to impose this solution. In these circumstances we should seek to maximise access to the North for NGOs. We should ask them as well as UN agencies to monitor the way the oil for food arrangements are working and alert the international community if the arrangements fail. Robust action would then be required by the international community, and especially by Iraq's friends, to exert pressure on the Iraqi Government. Britain will need to be ready to play a leading role at that stage.

I am copying this letter to Robin Cook, Geoffrey Hoon, and Mo Mowlam.

Yours

Clare

CLARE SHORT

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