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SECRETARY OF STATE

MSU 7/4/5/5S

11 September 2006

MA/VCDS

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HELICOPTER CAPABILITY

1. The Secretary of State was grateful for VCDS' minute of 7 September providing an update on options for increasing helicopter capability. The Secretary of State has asked for an urgent meeting to discuss this issue in further detail. He is concerned to ensure that officials are giving appropriate priority to measures to improve helicopter capability and have considered, and exhausted, every possibility, including those which they believe Ministers would find unpalatable. In particular, he would like to explore:

- a. When in October the 2 extra Chinook helicopters will get to Afghanistan and whether there is any way this can be accelerated;
- b. The proposal to convert Merlin maritime helicopters to a battlefield support role including: why 7 airframes; what is involved in the cheaper (£8.5M) and more expensive (£53M) options; how quickly either could be done; how would the crewing aspect be dealt with; and, if this works, what are the implications of going further than 7 airframes;
- c. A radical rethink on the 8 Chinook Mark 3. The Secretary of State wishes to explore all options including whether we could work with the airworthiness authorities to find a solution either to prove that these aircraft are safe to fly or properly to amend the regulations to reflect the nature of the aircraft and the role in which they will be used. He is not convinced that spending >£200M to try to get 6 airframes ready by 2011 is the best way ahead. Could we not sell or swap the aircraft in order quickly to acquire helicopters that did work?
- d. Leasing and contracting. Notwithstanding the view in theatre and PJHQ, what is the view of head office on whether using contractor

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