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IRAQ: SECURITY

The Prime Minister held a meeting today with your Secretary of State today on Iraq security. Also present were the Deputy Prime Minister, Chief of the Defence Staff, Sir Michael Jay, John Scarlett, Lieutenant General Fry, Jonathan Powell, Sir Nigel Sheinwald, Matthew Rycroft, David Hill and me.

2. John Scarlett set the security scene. Attacks on the Coalition were up at about 500 per week, as against 200 per week at the turn of the year; but down from a high of 800 per week in April. Fallujah was calm following the insertion of the Iraqi manned Fallujah Brigade although the US demands for the surrender of heavy weapons and foreign fighters had not been met. Ramadi and Mosul were both susceptible to Sunni violence against the Coalition, although there was little evidence of imminent deterioration. Attacks on the oil terminals and pipelines posed a strategic threat, as did sustained disruption of the main supply routes. In Najaf, Muqtada al Sadr was isolated and politically weak, and his activity was inspiring intra-Shia tension. The foreign fighters under the leadership of Al-Zarqawi, who was associated with Al Qaida, were planning big and widespread attacks in the run up to the Transition, including against the Shia. The CDS said that attacks in the south had gone up significantly last week, particularly around Amarah.

3. The Prime Minister said that there were two key issues in Iraq: the political process and security. The latter was the fundamental issue. Instability, faltering reconstruction and popular dissatisfaction resulted from the absence of security. The various attacks against the Coalition might not be co-ordinated but it was clear that they were effective. The Iraqis wanted to organise their security jointly with the Coalition, not to be under occupation.

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We needed a better and quicker plan for building Iraqi capacity in the Police, Civil Defence Corps, the Army and the Intelligence Service. Although the numbers were increasing, the capability was not there. Iraqi security forces were not equipped, trained or led to provide the necessary capacity. The handover to the Iraqis would only work if they were able to take charge, as they wished. He expected them to want to work with us. But the ultimate red card for action by the Coalition would be held by the Iraqis. There was a risk that Iraqi forces would be incapable of dealing with the security situation they would face, but that they would be reluctant to ask the Coalition to do the job for them. This put a real premium on building capacity urgently. He wanted to see General Petraeus on his way out to Iraq and he needed a detailed proposition to improve Iraqisation, on the basis of which he could talk to President Bush.

4. The Defence Secretary said that we could demonstrate a good model of how this should be done, as in southern Iraq. But there were differential rates at which progress was delivered. An additional point was that violence was now being used for internal political ends, not just against the Coalition. The CDS indicated that handing over security to local control in the south would be underway in June. He agreed that more could be done, particularly in relation to uniform, radios and basic equipment for the Iraqi police. Pay also had to be set at the right level to avoid rival structures such as the Mahdi Army being more attractive economically. As regards the formation of the new army, more could be done to make use of former members provided the de-Baathification policy was adjusted.

5. General Fry said that we also had to get the security structures right. The MNF and Iraqi Joint Headquarters had to co-ordinate their actions, within a framework set by the Iraqis at the top political level. Both the MNF and the Iraqi forces would operate their own chains of command. The Prime Minister said that the security system had to operate by consensus with the ultimate default position being that the Iraqis were in charge. The Defence Secretary said that after the Transition, the local police should be responsible for law and order, and in the event of trouble would call on the Iraqi army or the MNF.

6. The Prime Minister asked about the possible reinforcement of Iraq being considered by the MOD. The CDS said this was not easy since a substantial reinforcement would take the armed forces well beyond their planning guidelines. Any troops sent, for example, to Najaf would need to be trained, equipped and prepared to the proper level – this would take time. The Chiefs of Staff would make recommendations next week against three strategic yardsticks: solidarity with the Coalition; increased influence over the Coalition campaign in Iraq; and enhanced control over the handling of the Shia. The Prime Minister said that the state of politics in Iraq would bear on any decision to increase our commitment.

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7. In conclusion, the Prime Minister said that he would like, for the weekend from the Ministry of Defence, their best proposals for enhancing Iraqi security capability across the whole country. This should cover the police, the ICDC, the army and the Intelligence Service. Issues to be covered would include equipment, pay, leadership, training, redundancy and the extent to which former members of Iraqi forces should be recruited. He wanted a shopping list on the basis of which he could talk to President Bush to enable Iraqi capacity to be increased quickly.

8. I am sending copies of this letter to CDS, Michael Jay, John Scarlett, Nigel Sheinwald, Matthew Rycroft and Jonathan Powell.

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