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Dear Matthew

IRAQ: UK RESPONSE TO US APPROACHES

Initial advice on the US proposals:

- a. for the time being, we should not actively pursue the 3* HQ option;
- b. we should carry out, without commitment, detailed further work to examine the impact of meeting the US request that we replace the Spanish brigade and its Latin American contributors, by expanding MND(SE) to include the provinces of Najaf and Qadisiyah;
- c. we should consider the other US requests – for expanded Rear Area Security and for a mobile reserve – as part of this detailed further work, again without commitment;
- d. to this end, a recce party is deploying immediately, with FCO and DFID participation, to report back next week and allow more detailed analysis of the implications for force levels and structures;
- e. in parallel, further work will be done to assess the threat in the Spanish sector, the wider impact on the Armed Forces and implications for other commitments, to define the strategic objectives we would be seeking to achieve, and to identify the conditions we might wish to attach to any offer of assistance to the US;
- f. to keep options open, the current withdrawal of Warrior vehicles as part of the 20 Armoured Brigade/1 Mechanised Brigade roulement is being halted.

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- g. we cannot rule out the possibility that further work will suggest that we should not take over Najaf and Qadisiyah;
- h. we should therefore continue to take a non-committal line with the US, other partners, Parliament and the media.

Detail

The Defence Secretary and the Chiefs of Staff have reached initial views on the US approaches for additional UK military assistance.

You will recall the four elements of the US proposals:

- a. A 3* HQ to command both MND(Centre-South) and MND(South-East), deploying as rapidly as possible and remaining for at least 90 days;
- b. An armoured or mechanised battlegroup to be available as a mobile reserve for the whole of Iraq, deploying as rapidly as possible and remaining for at least 90 days;
- c. An expansion of MND(SE) to compensate for the departure of the Spanish brigade (and probably some of the Latin Americans), prior to that departure and remaining for the indefinite future. There are some indications that the US is also approaching other countries for assistance on this point;
- d. An expansion of rear area security to protect the main supply routes running up from Kuwait.

Investigations in the last few days have thrown up conflicting evidence about the US thinking behind these proposals, and the relative priority they attach to each element: for instance, some have said that the 3* HQ is the most important, others that it is the least important. It seems unlikely that further analysis will produce a more coherent picture. But it is clear that the US are concerned about the overall trend of events, and that they want us to help, particularly in MND(CS).

Context

The US approach comes against the backdrop of operations in Fallujah and against the Sadr Militia, and of the impending withdrawal of the Spanish and Latin American contingents (some 2,400 troops if they all go, although El Salvador (380 troops) and Nicaragua (100 troops) have not yet said that they will pull out) from Najaf and Qadisiyah.

The Spanish withdrawal presents two types of problem:

- a. The concrete problem of how to fill a gap in two provinces, which happen to border on MND(SE).
- b. The less tangible but nonetheless real problem of opening up cracks in the coalition. Although the departing troops will not be greatly missed, there is a risk of a knock-on effect on the resolve of other coalition members. This is particularly true in MND(CS), where most of the (so far) remaining contingents have been rumoured to be considering their position. If the Spanish example triggers a more general rush for the exit in MND(CS), we cannot rule out the possibility of some impact on MND(SE) contributors.

For both these reasons it is undoubtedly in our interests to see prompt action to fill the gap left by the Spanish and their partners and to reduce the vulnerability of MND(CS).

The Sadr Militia problem is currently less pressing. Although it has not been resolved, it has been contained and Sadr has lost much of the support he temporarily enjoyed. Although it is unsatisfactory that Sadr and his henchmen are still at large and have a measure of local control, this is a much lesser evil than the wider unrest which would follow coalition military action in Najaf.

The Fallujah problem remains extremely difficult. The US are well aware of the wider risks of offensive operations, and have recently been taking a more measured and exploratory approach. Nonetheless, their planning continues to assume that further kinetic action will be required. Although they envisage an incremental and carefully targeted approach, even this will be vulnerable to misrepresentation in the Arab and world media. If US forces get into difficulties, the instinct of US commanders will be to go in hard.

A 3* HQ commanding "the Shia South" (MND(CS) & MND(SE))

This proposal raises difficult issues. These relate not only to HQ ARRC – the only 3* HQ we have – but also to the additional military forces that might be required to make a success of the whole of MND(CS). It may have different implications or present different opportunities after 30 June, but the Defence Secretary and the Chiefs of Staff do not believe that it should be actively considered for the time being.

Expansion of MND(SE)

The Spanish are due to hand over their sector to the US on 14 May. A situation in which the UK took over in turn, and brought Najaf and Qadisiyah into MND(SE), would have a number of features:

- a. We would be relieving the US (and the Poles) of a significant problem. MND(CS) would remain dysfunctional, but would be smaller and represent less of a risk to overall success. We cannot say that by doing this (or not doing this) we would be making the difference between success or failure, but it would be a significant contribution;
- b. without some contribution from other coalition or new partners we would risk a significant reduction in the diversity of the coalition;
- c. we would have responsibility for the bulk of the Shia population, and the opportunity and burden of managing Najaf (but not Karbala or Sadr City);
- d. we would inherit conditions set by others, in both the military and civil spheres. This includes ineffective ISF who have been understandably intimidated by Sadr's militia, and a highly sensitive city, Najaf, which is virtually ungoverned;
- e. we would be significantly increasing MND(SE)'s span of command, and the potential for additional reinforcement to be required in the event of future difficulties;
- f. we would be incurring a risk of higher casualties.
the Spanish and Latin American forces have taken some casualties. With a more proactive British approach, we would expect the casualty rate to be higher. The DIS are working on a threat assessment for the Spanish sector;
- g. the implications for force levels, and for logistics and Urgent Operational Requirement procurement, will depend on the results of further work following a recce in theatre. Until then it is not wise to hazard a guess at the net additional number of troops required, except to say that it will be substantial and could be as many as 4,000 troops. In analysing this we will need to take into account the other two US proposals, for expanded rear area security and for a mobile reserve (in the South, rather than theatre-wide);
- h. in terms of timing, it is unlikely that we could be ready to take over before 1 July.

Wider implications

Further work will analyse the potential impact on the Armed Forces, on other commitments - notably Northern Ireland and the BOWMAN digitisation programme - and on its ability to provide capability for future contingencies. It is likely that units would face reduced tour intervals. It would also make even more difficult the announcements which will have to be made in the summer about the restructuring of the Armed Forces.

Implications for Other Government Departments

Mr Hoon believes that any significant increase in our military commitment in Iraq would need to be considered in the context of the whole cross-Government effort. We do not know enough about the state of politics and reconstruction in MND(CS) at present, and if we were to take on Najaf and Qadisiyah we would need FCO and DFID to help ensure that acceptable arrangements are in place on the CPA (and post-CPA) side. We should bear in mind that we are likely to face a long hot summer of unrest over infrastructure, especially shortfalls in electricity, against a background of political flux, and this is not a situation that the Armed Forces can handle alone. Without an aggressive approach overseas all departments we would risk the success of any expanded mission.

Conditionality

If we did decide, in due course, to offer to take over the Spanish sector, we should need also to decide what we wanted in return from the US, and we would wish to give this further thought, but elements might include:

- Closer/fuller/earlier involvement in planning and decision-making both in-theatre and between capitals, including an institutionalised process of campaign review at the strategic level;
- Guarantees on key elements of the wider effort in Iraq, such as the flow of US Supplemental funding;
- Taking a US unit under command, if we judge that desirable and sensible;
- Some, if only token, contributions from other countries.

We will also need to be clear about the strategic objectives against which we are making any offer. For instance, we may want to link it to the completion of elections to the Transitional bodies early next year, to avoid any assumption of an open-ended commitment.

Next Steps

PJHQ deployed a recce team today on 28 April. FCO and DFID will participate. We are also halting the withdrawal (planned as part of the current roulement) of Warrior vehicles in order to keep options open. Further work on the other issues described above will continue in parallel, with a view to discussion by the Defence Secretary and the Chiefs of Staff next week. It should be noted, however, that it is unlikely that the results of the recce will have been translated into a precise requirement for additional forces at that stage. In the meantime, during the course of our normal contact with coalition partners, we have begun to seek their views on the potential for further military contributions.

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Presentation

Any significant change to our military commitment in Iraq will have to be announced to Parliament. We fought off an urgent question on 26 April with some difficulty, and the Speaker might not be so sympathetic next time. Expansion of MND(SE) would undoubtedly require an Oral Statement. But this will obviously have to await a decision, and we will need at that point to have enough clarity on the detailed implications to be able to answer the obvious follow-up questions. Mr Hoon believes that we should try to set any decision in the context of the Iraqi political process, perhaps focussing on the period leading to the election of the Transitional bodies, rather than allow it to be seen merely as filling Spanish boots. Ideally we would be able to link it to a new UNSCR. It will be important to be able to demonstrate clarity of purpose, the capability to deliver it, and the gaining of additional influence over the conduct of the campaign.

In the meantime, our general line should remain non-committal, including with the US. It is important that they do not assume that the recce indicates that we have taken any decision. With our MND(SE) coalition partners, who are meeting in MOD on 29 April for one of our periodic stocktakes, we are taking the same line. But this will be an opportunity to make a general case for a surge of effort, albeit with little expectation that any of them will want to increase their commitment.

I am copying this letter to Jonathan Sinclair (FCO), Moazzam Malik (DfID), and Mark Bowman (HMT) and David Brummell (AG).

J C S Baker
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Private Secretary

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