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Prime Minister

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IRAQ'S CULTURAL HERITAGE

To update you on progress made in ensuring the security of Iraq's cultural heritage both in museums and sensitive archaeological sites and to suggest next steps.

As you know the Ministry of Defence have throughout the conflict been alert to the need to protect sensitive cultural and archaeological sites in Iraq. More recently they have been working hard to ensure that such sites are secured from the risk of looting. There have been stories about looting and destruction of artefacts in Baghdad and Mosul. We have no means yet of ascertaining how widespread this has been or how serious the damage. Nevertheless we need to ensure that measures are put in place now both to protect immediately vulnerable sites and to begin the process of helping the Iraqi people to conserve and protect their heritage.

I have today spoken to Geoff Hoon to ask him what further measures might be taken in those areas under the control of British forces to encourage the return of any looted artefacts. We know that local religious leaders have already taken a lead on this. We want to do everything we can to work with them. I have suggested to Geoff that we consider publicising an amnesty to encourage cooperation using all local media. Geoff has also agreed to take this issue up with US colleagues to ensure a consistent approach across Iraq.

I have also today addressed a press conference at the British Museum. I have asked Neil Macgregor to take a lead alongside international colleagues from Europe and the US to ensure a coordinated response from the professional archaeological fraternity. British Museum staff are internationally acknowledged experts on the archaeology of the ancient Middle East and can command respect and support from a wide range of other professionals, including those from Iraq, Iran and Syria.



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It is important in all this - and particularly if we are to keep the Europeans on side - that we work closely with UNESCO. Neil will be hosting a symposium of international colleagues alongside UNESCO on 29 April. I am asking him to ensure that the US, who as you know are not currently members of UNESCO, are closely involved. We are, of course, also working to ensure that UK administrators and professionals are part of the US Organisation for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Affairs (ORHA). Members of my department will be joining the organisation in Kuwait in the next few days. Potentially I see us as being able to play an important role in bridging any possible gaps between ORHA and UNESCO.

We are also working to ensure that antiquities looted from Iraq are returned if they reach the international art market. A UN sanction currently requires state parties to the UN to impose import controls on objects from Iraq, including antiquities. This means that no objects could reach the UK legally without an import licence, and we would not issue such a licence. I am confident that the legitimate art market will cooperate fully, and I have written to the British Art Market Federation and other key bodies.

This measure will not, however, close off the substantial market in illicit trade. Another way to strengthen our position in this area is the Private Members Bill "Dealing in Cultural Objects (Offences) Bill" which will make it illegal to trade in unlawfully removed cultural objects. We are establishing the feasibility of speeding up this Government supported Private Members Bill, and I have discussed this with Hillary Armstrong.

In the longer term problems may arise in the following areas, and I have considered how best to manage them. I have already mentioned the possible tension between ORHA and UNESCO and how we might be able to help here. In this context, you may wish to mention to Chancellor Schroeder when you see him later today, how much you hope that German conservationists and archaeologists will feel able to work with Neil Macgregor and UNESCO to assist the Iraqi conservationists and archaeologists in conserving their cultural heritage. I attach a short speaking note on this. The other potential area for risk is how our involvement might be perceived internationally given the nineteenth century tendency for Britain to remove cultural artefacts. There are hints of this coming through in press comment already. I am absolutely confident, however, that a conservation effort led by Neil Macgregor working closely with international colleagues, and, crucially, UNESCO, will nip this in the bud.

I am copying this to members of the War Cabinet and to Sir Andrew Turnbull.

Tessa Jowell

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SCHROEDER SPEAKING NOTE

- important that we act quickly to protect vulnerable cultural sites in Iraq. UK forces are already acting on the ground to secure what may be most at risk and talking to US colleagues to encourage them to do likewise.
- both Germany and UK are complying with the UN sanction which imposes import controls on objects from Iraq, including antiquities. This secures the legal market. Here in the UK we are also taking steps to clamp down on illicit trade.
- longer-term it will be crucial for professionals from Europe and the US to work with the Iraqis to conserve their cultural heritage. Delighted that representatives from Germany will take part in a symposium at the British Museum jointly chaired by the Museum and UNESCO.

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