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(F) Iraq

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CH/EXCHEQUER	
DATE	15 APR 2003
COPIES	IRAQ;
	ETC;
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15 April 2003



Dear Jack

IRAQ'S CULTURAL HERITAGE

Concern about damage to Iraq's cultural heritage has escalated in the wake of stories about looting at Baghdad Museum and the Museum and Library in Mosul. I thought it would be helpful to set out where I think we have got to in developing a coordinated approach to protecting and conserving Iraq's cultural heritage.

The immediate issue is to secure sensitive sites from looters. I understand that British Forces are working to improve the security situation in Basra, and, if necessary, seal the Museum there. I hope also that we can consider holding an amnesty in Basra to allow items to be returned. Coalition forces could emulate such a scheme in other areas under their control.

The next thing we need to do is to ensure that antiquities looted from Iraq are recovered - consequently we will need to monitor 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 there are no plans to issue any such licences. I have today written to the British Art Market Federation and other key bodies asking for their assistance in locating and identifying any of the looted material should it arrive in the UK. I have also written to John Healey about the role of Customs and Excise.

In terms of the evaluation of damage and helping the Iraqi people to conserve their heritage, we will need to ensure that the Organisation for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Affairs is staffed to respond quickly to immediate needs. My officials are in discussions with yours about how best this might be achieved.



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In parallel, Neil McGregor, Director of the British Museum, is working closely with UNESCO to develop a longer-term strategy for assistance. The British Museum has a long history of contact with Iraqi archaeologists, and Neil will be hosting a meeting jointly with UNESCO of experts from all over the world, including from the four other major world museums (the Louvre, the Metropolitan, The Hermitage Museum and the Berlin Museum), on 29 April.

> I am copying this letter to the Prime Minister, members of the War Cabinet and to Sir Andrew Turnbull.

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TESSA JOWELL

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