

DECLASSIFIED

C03/01034/MK

Prime Minister



4¹² May 2003

IRAQ'S CULTURAL HERITAGE

To report progress made towards ensuring the security of Iraq's cultural heritage and steps taken to begin helping the Iraqis protect and conserve museum collections and archaeological sites, following the seminar on Tuesday with Donny George (Director of Research from the Baghdad Museum) and the British Museum led, UNESCO sponsored, coalition of international experts.

We convened a conference last Tuesday because of the strong views held by some that we could have done more to protect Iraq's cultural treasures, particularly within US controlled areas. At this seminar, Donny George and I discussed the organised looting of certain priceless treasures and he confirmed the severe damage to a number of important Islamic libraries in Baghdad. He also claimed that US troops refused to protect the Baghdad Museum for 3 days.

As I already had explained, the Ministry of Defence had, throughout the conflict, been alert to the need to protect sensitive cultural and archaeological sites in Iraq. Before the conflict began they sought advice from archaeologists and Newcastle University and University College, London. British troops were advised about the whereabouts of such sites, as, I understand, were US troops.

There is now a growing concern that Iraqi treasures are already leaving the country through unprotected borders. I realise that Coalition troops have many pressing priorities, but I have raised this issue with Jack Straw. More positively we are getting reports that the broadcasts on Freedom TV and Radio from religious leaders encouraging people to return antiquities which have either been stolen or taken into safe-keeping are having a good effect.

We continue our work to kill off the market for antiquities that are looted from Iraq. I am confident that the legitimate art market are cooperating fully, and they will be helped by last Tuesday's announcement that UNESCO intend to establish a database of items believed to have been stolen. There is a concern that, when UN sanctions are lifted there should be no diminution of control over the import of

DECLASSIFIED



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

DECLASSIFIED

Iraqi cultural property. UNESCO have announced that they will be proposing to the UN a continuing selective embargo on the movement of Iraqi cultural property. This is clearly an option, and we are very supportive of the aim, as, we understand, are the US State Department. I am working with Jack Straw to work out how best the international community might achieve this aim.

With regard to clamping down on illicit trade within the UK, we have also made real progress in hastening the progress of the Private Members Bill "Dealing in Cultural Objects (Offences)" which will make it illegal in this country to trade in cultural objects unlawfully removed from another country. I am grateful to Hilary Armstrong for her support in this matter. It looks as if we might be able to get this onto the statute books this Parliamentary session.

The meeting at the BM on Tuesday did expose the real risk, which I flagged-up in my letter to you of 15 April, of tension developing between the United States and the wider international heritage community, as embodied by UNESCO. Donny George made it clear that, in his view, the Iraqis will want to work with the BM-led, UNESCO sponsored, coalition of international experts (which includes the Metropolitan Museum, the Getty, the Louvre, the Hermitage and the Berlin Museum) rather than with the US. As I have said before, I think that the UK can play an important role in helping to reconcile these positions. A team of my officials will shortly join ORHA and can take responsibility for this co-ordination. As there is clearly a wider political context, I have sought Jack's support on handling this matter.

I am copying this to Cabinet colleagues and to Sir Andrew Turnbull.

TJ.

TESSA JOWELL

DECLASSIFIED