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PRIME MINISTER

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### IRAQ: VISIT TO BAGHDAD AND BASRA

Together with John Scarlett and Nick Cannon, I visited Baghdad on Tuesday, and Basra yesterday. Main impressions:

- Brits everywhere are doing a remarkable job in difficult, sometimes dangerous, and always physically uncomfortable circumstances. No routine self-congratulation this. It has given us a distinct and positive profile – for the moment – which adds to a strong folk memory of our role in establishing Iraq;

- Baghdad remains key; and the key to Baghdad is security. Only when the security situation improves will people have confidence to go back to work and rebuild their lives. But on the flimsy evidence of my 18 hour visit, things did not seem as bad as painted by the media. We drove around in landrovers with flakjackets but frequently stopped to talk to Iraqis, shake hands etc. There was no sense of being under immediate threat. The mood still seems either cautiously welcoming or at least acquiescent – never hostile. But this could turn fast, if the security situation is not sorted

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out fast. Breaking the pattern of lawlessness and looting at night is particularly critical;

- Police training could have a disproportionate impact. (Police are conspicuous by their absence). A quick win would be moving 16 Air Assault Brigade to Baghdad with the task of providing police training for six weeks. They won't want to do longer than that - they were due to come home in the next few days and morale will suffer if they miss their well earned summer break. The Chiefs will let you have advice today or tomorrow. Tony Piggott, who accompanied me to assess the problems at firsthand, will recommend that 16 Air Assault Brigade should take this on as long as the mission is clearly defined and is strictly time-limited. I have no doubt that the impact of British troops training with, and working alongside, Iraqis would be considerable. The hard-pressed Bremer is very keen to have them.

- ORHA is the shambles already described by John Sawers (who was with me for much of my visit and is clearly doing an excellent job in working with Bremer in Baghdad). A huge, disorganised, dysfunctional outfit, ORHA gives little impression that it can organise itself, let alone administer Iraq. But I found Bremer impressive. He will get a grip, and wants our help. (It would be worth inviting him to come and see you for half an hour when you are in Basra next week - it would bolster him personally and the coalition overall). One way of helping him is to

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provide the police training in Baghdad; another is to get DFID properly and energetically engaged. (There is a residue of bitterness about their lack of involvement: they have committed few people and have apparently just completed their third independent reconnaissance about security for staff before deploying more people). Valerie will make things change. I hope she will get experts to ORHA very fast. Just as valuable now would be a DFID commitment to set up a Police Training College within the next few weeks to build on whatever 16 Air Assault Brigade achieve, if they are deployed. The Police Service of Northern Ireland should be asked to help. This could be a potent package: high profile with quick impact;

Basra is way ahead of Baghdad. There are still worries about security, services and infrastructure. But our military are on the case. I walked for 20 minutes (close protection but no flakjacket) through one of Basra's main markets. It was thronged with people and well supplied with goods. It could have been Cairo or Amman;

I did a meeting with the Iraqi political leaders [redacted]

[redacted] They are super impatient for instant political progress, and for the emergence of a new Iraqi government which they want to run but with a reassuring coalition military presence supporting them in the background. I said we would go as fast as possible; but that meant only as fast as was feasible and sensible. We required them to be constructive and patient. I think they will be for a bit yet. But we will face increasing tension between the need to do it fast and the need to do it right. We must work hard to stay alongside the different political leaders.

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## Conclusion

There is still time to get on top of the Baghdad problem; but not much.

But that will change if the ORHA mess is not dealt with fast.

The UK has done a remarkable job in Basra and the South. But the situation is very fragile and we could be knocked off course by continuing failure to grip Baghdad. We shall have the cooperation and support of the locals as long as they see improvement in their daily lives and believe a political process has begun – and they understand what it is. But if the momentum stalls, the prognosis will become much darker.

The UK military and their political advisers say that there is so far little evidence for US worries about Iranian Shi'ites under every bed. There is some predictable, so far low level, Iranian meddling but no blueprint for a takeover. And according to the experts, there is anyway only very limited sympathy among (far from monolithic) Iraqi Shi'ites for their Iranian counterparts. Home grown fundamentalism may be a more real worry – something we still know comparatively little about.

We shall have to resist the US tendency to present the Iranian threat as dramatically worse than it is. We mustn't be complacent: but we should counter exaggerated fears from Washington. They could acquire a dynamic of their own, and distort the political process in Iraq, as well as wider relationships with Iran.

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