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Meeting of the Secretaries of State for Foreign Affairs, Defence and International Development - 16 September 2003 at 2.15 pm

1. The Foreign Secretary hosted a meeting for his defence and international development counterparts on 16 September. This followed the Strategy Unit presentation in July to Cabinet ministers on the Strategic Audit.
2. The Foreign Secretary had proposed three agenda items: further trilateral meetings; joint work on how we plan and prepare for post conflict reconstruction; and state failure. He had circulated in advance an FCO/DFID/MOD paper on post conflict reconstruction and FCO papers on post conflict reconstruction and state failure. The Strategy Unit had sent ministers a briefing note on its proposed project on failed and failing states.

Future Trilateral Meetings

3. The Foreign Secretary said the trilateral relationship was critical for effective international action by HMG. He was keen to improve policy co-ordination. Regular ministerial meetings could form an important part of this. Baroness Amos welcomed his suggestion. She said they met regularly to discuss specific issues, but there was little opportunity to discuss broader strategic issues. She argued it would be good to do so every 6 months or so.
4. The Defence Secretary said there was a risk of too many meetings covering the same ground and not enough business being done at them. He favoured 2-3 ministerial meetings each year on strategic issues and a similar number at which specific business was transacted. Junior ministers might take the lead for some of the latter.
5. It was agreed that strategic trilateral meetings every 6 months or so would be useful and that other ministers (eg from the Treasury) should be involved as appropriate.

Post Conflict Planning and Preparation

6. The Foreign Secretary highlighted the contrast between the UK's preparations for domestic crises and for post conflict situations. He said we needed to do more to get ahead of the curve.
7. The Defence Secretary said the military spent a lot of time looking at the forces they needed and their readiness levels, but there was no similar process on the civilian side. We should look to reach international agreement on what resources and skills were required and where they were available.

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8. The Development Secretary agreed but said it was important to link up first across government. She highlighted the need to make sure we learned the lessons from previous interventions.
9. The following points were also made:-
 - We should identify generic post conflict requirements by looking at the various situations in which we had been involved.
 - We should do more to identify, train and prepare people for future crisis situations. There had been no lack of volunteers across government for Iraq, but there was sometimes a perception that getting involved in such situations could damage career progression. It was important for all staff to recognise the importance of crisis management skills.
 - An analogy was drawn with the Territorial Army (TA). After 9/11 the MOD had established pools of TA reserves in each region on call to deal with civil emergencies. It might be possible to use the TA's training and pre-deployment centres for those involved in civilian post conflict work.
 - The policing/security element was critical. There were large numbers of retired police officers and former members of the armed forces who could provide a useful pool to draw on when looking for people to work in post conflict environments. We needed to remain in better contact with them.
 - The pace of crises was now so fast it was important to have all the procedures in place beforehand. There was already a lot of relevant expertise within Whitehall (eg DFID's standby capacity for restoring essential infrastructure) but we often had to scabble around to bring everything together. The creation of standard contingency arrangements could make it easier politically to start preparing for the post conflict phase and to engage others.
 - There could be significant costs to all this. We should also look to build up capacity elsewhere. The UN was a key player in post conflict situations and the EU was an increasingly important actor too.
10. There was some discussion of who should take the lead in co-ordinating HMG's preparations for post conflict situations. Ministers decided we should agree the tasks and then identify who should lead for each one. The Cabinet Office should play a co-ordinating role.
11. Ministers agreed the proposals in the FCO paper and that officials should:-

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- review HMG's approach to planning and preparation for post conflict situations at the national level and then look at influencing others, with the EU a high priority;
- consider setting up a cross Whitehall co-ordinating mechanism and look at the various tools needed, including personnel databases, how we spread best practice and training; and
- take into account the resource implications.

Failed and Failing States

12. The Foreign Secretary said he did not fully understand what the intended scope of the Strategy Unit project was. It was important it should be properly targeted with a clear idea of outcomes. Sir Michael Jay agreed. A lot of thinking had already been done by departments and could be drawn on. He favoured a more narrowly defined project over a 6 month time-frame.

13. It was agreed that:-

- the three departments should actively support a more narrowly focused 6 month project on failed states; and
- Sir Michael Jay should discuss this with the head of the Strategy Unit.

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