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Director Iraq



I visited Basra from 14 – 19 June as part of the regular commitment by HRD to visit posts in Iraq every 6 months. It was my third visit since Dec 04.

Overall I found the post in fine shape, staff morale was good across the board but the problem of getting in and out of the palace compound is causing operational and welfare issues. I should add that I flew out from Basra Palace on the Sunday evening as the news came in on the tragic shootings of [REDACTED] The long-term ramifications of this for our operations are still ongoing but the account of my meeting with the LE staff, recorded separately are prophetic.

Details

1. Air Bridge

This is a cause of concern for all staff. Not only affecting their ability to do their job but also adding to the angst of decompression breaks and final departures – will I get out on time to make my connections and get home for X ? My own inward journey experience was 27 hours from leaving my hotel in Kuwait to arriving at Basra Palace with an overnight at Basra airport. My previous trips by road to Basra usually took a morning. When I got to the APOD at Basra airport I found that there were several BCG staff stuck waiting for a helicopter move – some had been waiting as long as 4 days. I know that Iraq Directorate (ID) are looking at other alternatives but the feedback I got before I left the UK indicated that this was not proving an easy task and was unlikely to be successful. The US have agreed that we can put staff on their weekly Chinook flight to/from Kuwait, but there are no guaranteed places so it's on a "space available" basis only. When I spoke to DFID they were talking about possibly moving some Sat kit to the airport to utilise down time while staff are stuck there. There may be scope for some sort of shared communications facilities in the future.

2. Decompression Breaks

Because of the problems of getting in and out Senior Management are wondering about changing the frequency of decompression breaks to reduce the amount of staff moves but give them extended periods outside Iraq – something along the line of 8/9 weeks in country then guaranteed 2+ weeks leave with whatever travel time either side. Baghdad are aware and have no objection to Basra going its own way on this in response to their operational need. Informal discussion with DFID indicated that they would not welcome any change to the current set up of 6 weeks and 10 days off. It was left to Post to discuss with Staff and get an opinion from Frontier Medical and put the case back to ID, SMD and HRD. Post will also need to consider how they will cover the longer absences. At the moment Iraq Directorate have been able to help out on an ad hoc basis, but that cannot always be guaranteed.

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3. Meeting with LE Staff Association

I had a meeting with the LE staff association, which is recorded separately and not copied to all.

4. Meeting with UK based Staff

Updated UK based staff on recent and forthcoming HR changes; session attended by all bar one UK based staff in post at the time. We also had a wider discussion on Iraq related issues.

a). Medical Questionnaires

I was asked why posts were not consulted on the wording of the questionnaire. I said that their predecessors and Baghdad had been consulted extensively last year, and some but not all of the points they made had been taken into consideration. There were no plans to adjust the form anymore, the consultation process was over. I explained that it was important that the forms were completed honestly and as per the prescribed timetable. In addition to monitoring the effect on individuals it would allow the FCO Occupational Health doctors to build up a picture of the impact these postings were having on our staff and consider if we could move to longer postings as a norm in the future.

b). Golden Tickets

Were they really worth anything? I said they did work, and were not a guarantee of the posting of your dreams but an added extra. I used opportunity to stress the importance of getting timely quality detailed appraisals from their tour in Iraq. One person asked if they could use a Golden ticket for a home posting. I said yes but people were normally choosing to use them for the overseas Boards.

No comments made about financial package.

5. TMO

Concerns were raised about TMO coverage for Basra. Currently Post are covered by the regional TMO based in Kuwait. Post are worried that not having someone based in Basra makes them vulnerable. In the event of something going down, the current problem of getting in and out of the Palace compound means that there is a risk that there could be an unacceptable delay in the arrival of the TMO from Kuwait. This is a high security risk post with the largest CCTV network in the world (according to the OSM) and given the push on Better Basra, post cannot afford to be vulnerable on the technical maintenance side. You will recall that last summer we had to look again at TMO coverage in Baghdad, which resulted in the creation of a second TMO slot and upgrading the existing one. Post suggested that they have their own dedicated TMO with leave cover provide by TMOs in Baghdad. I recommend that DG Pol RG look at this proposal. There are cost implications and it will impact on the job load of the Kuwait TMO but overall it's business critical that Basra have ready access to TMO expertise.

6. Management Section

Each time I visit the post I can see visible improvements and Justine and her team are to be commended for their efforts. The Villas are a success and have sparked some

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interesting alternative social outlets – Basra Hilton and golf driving range. Though staff are pleased to have moved from Pods the overall finish of these “villas” is not brilliant but staff are relatively phlegmatic about it all. Good use is being made of the pool including opening the facility to the Army during office hours only, as part of a good neighbour initiative.

However there is still too much fire fighting going on and with proposed staffing increases, Better Basra, PRT and the uncertainty about LE staff will all add to the workload of an already overburdened Management Section. I think the time has come to reconsider the staffing levels in this section. I believe there is scope for an additional B3 or C4 to ensure the increased workload and leave absences are adequately covered. Post will put a case back to you.

There also seems to be an unacceptable level of petty complaints coming their way, both in and out of office hours, mainly from non FCO UK based staff. Management Staff should be able to go to the bar without fear of social time being interrupted by colleagues pestering them about work issues all the time. I discussed this with Robin and Dominic and how they might help tackle this issue.

7. Directly “Contracted” Staff

I have put the word contracted in inverted commas as Iraq Directorate is awaiting a legal interpretation of the employment relationship with the Prison and Police officials that work for us in Iraq.

Concerns were expressed about the pre-posting briefing these staff receive, as there appeared to be no management of expectations judging from the range and level of queries and complaints post arrival. One Prison official had complained that his desk was not the correct size for someone of his rank! These issues do not relate as far as I can tell to indirectly contracted staff i.e.: Crown Agents, KBR, CRG etc. Post agreed that they would look at putting more information/photos in the post report, drawing up some sort of preposting information pack and a management charter/SLA.

who was in Basra on TD agreed that this was something Iraq Directorate could look at as part of the overall recruitment process for contractors.

Queries were raised by post about the discrepancies between Prison/Police etc tour lengths that go beyond the FCO current limit; taking large amounts of paid leave in addition to their decompression breaks; the reliability of their medical clearance and ongoing medical surveillance throughout their tour. The recent exercise on duty of care has highlighted that there are discrepancies and work is in hand to rectify these issues.

8. PRT

Both Kuwait and Basra would like clarification on how much they should be involved in the administration of these operations.

9. Frontier Medical

Briefed the 2 FM medics on the various processes the FCO has put in place on pre-posting clearance etc and the changes to the AKE course. Still some confusion on their part about their role in the quarterly medical questionnaire, but H&W and Capita

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OH Doctors will contact them direct on that score. Concerns persist about the medical suitability of some of the contractors for both FCO and OGDs. Fitness concerns arising in the AKE course are not being brought to the FCO's attention by AKE. Julian Chandler is pursuing that point with the course organisers. FM suggested that non FCO UK based staff should have to successfully pass the Overseas Offshore medical or something similarly rigorous as a condition of employment. Iraq Directorate is taking this idea forward.

Basra, unlike Baghdad, was not charging for prescriptions. Since my visit this has been introduced. Still problems with staff arriving without sufficient supplies of their regular prescriptions and not all inoculations done. Some of these issues will be tackled by the latest amendments to the Iraq T&Cs for FCO staff but we also need to consider how we can ensure that contractors are also getting this information. This is something that we can look at in the contractors Forum.

10. Life Support Contracts

The food is a tremendous improvement from my last visit when the majority of the meals were inedible. Overall Staff are very happy with the range and quality of food available. At SMO's request, the means to produce a toasted sandwich etc are now on offer in the Club so there is now something more than just alcohol served there. Apart from SMO no one raised the issue of food charging. Since my visit Basra are now charging for soft drinks.

Staffs at post across the board were genuinely unhappy to see Armourgroup go and clearly worried about the transition period. It was clear from the farewell BBQs I attended that the Armourgroup Ghurkhas were an integral part of the Basra village community.

I have tried to make this report as detailed as possible as I am away on leave until 17 July but am happy to discuss any aspect on my return with you or your team.

4 July 06

CC
Nigel Casey
Ros Marsden

David Warren

Robin Lamb

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