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Sir Peter Ricketts KCMG
The Permanent Under Secretary of State

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Dominic Asquith
HM Ambassador
BAGHDAD

9 October 2006

Dear Dominic,

IRAQ: POST SECURITY

I was very grateful for your letter of 20 September and Ros Marsden's letters of 25 August and 27 September on the security of our Posts in Iraq. The safety of all our staff, and those for whom we have a duty of care, remains my highest concern, and that of the Foreign Secretary. Your leadership on this issue in Post is greatly appreciated here.

As you will know, I have formally adopted the 4 tests Michael Jay set for staff working in Iraq. I accept your and Ros Marsden's confirmation that they are still being met for all the staff under our duty of care in Iraq. I know you and your professional Overseas Security Managers will keep this under constant review.

I am particularly conscious of the threat to staff in Basra, and welcome the further measures the Post have introduced following the recent death of a US contractor in the Palace Compound. The 4 October incident on our own part of the compound underlined the importance of all staff firmly adhering to the tighter rules you have introduced.

I am also grateful to you and to Ros for flagging up some medium term issues. I agree entirely that a radical review of our presence in Basra will be needed if the efforts we put in across Government over the next 6 months do not make a positive difference. We will need to start thinking now about contingency plans, in co-ordination with the MOD planners.

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I look forward to your recommendations on the future of our representation in Northern Iraq. I am aware of the arguments for moving from our current base with the US in Kirkuk, and perhaps opening some sort of a presence in Erbil. Needless to say, the security and cost implications will be big factors in any decisions we make on this.

I also note what you say about the need to take decisions soon in respect of investment in the Baghdad Embassy site. I am sure we should look to move ahead with replacement of remaining Red Sea containers with more hardened accommodation as quickly as possible. Beyond that, we will need to consider what measures we take in response to the US Embassy move (for example, in respect of a new Residence, and helipad) in the context of a hard look at the sustainability of the current site in the light of prospective changes to the international zone and the security environment in which the Post is likely to be operating in from the end of 2007.

Finally, you and Ros are right to underline the importance that is attached here to your teams' work. But your staff's safety must remain our paramount concern. Please do tell us immediately if you ever feel you are being pressured to take a risk with which you or your OSMs are uncomfortable.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Peter Ricketts'.

Peter Ricketts

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