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From: Dominic Asquith, Director Iraq
Date: 13 April 2006

cc: Peter Ricketts, UKDEL NATO
Dickie Stagg
John Sawers
David Richmond
David Warren
Nigel Casey
Andrew Noble

William Patey, Baghdad
Robin Lamb, Basra

Reference:

To: PS / PUS

SUBJECT: BASRA

1. You will have seen Peter Ricketts's very helpful letter of 10 April following his visit to Baghdad and Basra. I shall be out of the office for the next two weeks, so thought it might be useful to set out where we are on some of the issues that Peter raises.
 - (i) Draw down of staff. We shall be reviewing next week the decision to proceed with the recommendations in submission. I shall find it hard to believe that we will be able to build up at that stage. Indeed, I think the pressures are likely to be more in the other direction. The Basra compound continues to come under attack and the missiles being used are more accurate than the ones used in the past (there is a separate question to be addressed relating to the possible Iranian origin of these missiles). Before departing, James Tansley put in place contingency planning on what would trigger a further draw down. I agree with Peter that Robin Lamb should keep this under close review.
 - (ii) Protecting Basra Palace. We remain in contact with PJHQ at this end and Robin with MND(SE) at his end. We should not underestimate the difficulty of securing the battle space around the Palace site to a depth which will provide effective security.

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- (iii) Airlift from the Palace compound. David Richmond and I took this forward with General Houghton (CJO) in the margins of Chiefs yesterday. We made the following points.
- Given the difficult operating conditions in Basra city and the vulnerability of staff on the compound to attack, we were drawing down some of our staff. In such circumstances, and to keep the drawdown to levels which did not have a significant impact on our ability to deliver on our objectives, we would need to have much greater confidence in the reliability of air transport between Palace compound - Basra airport - Kuwait. It was now so unreliable that some staff were even contemplating not taking their R&R.
 - The airbridge was also important in ensuring staff engaged in the SSR programme were able effectively to carry out their objectives. Long delays at Basra were preventing this. This would become even more important once the PRT was up and running (mid-May).
 - We suspected that the problem was a mixture of military priorities and resources. It was essential that the military viewed the operation in Basra as a team effort: we were each contributing to each others objectives.

General Houghton took full note of these points. He said he would investigate the resources versus priorities issue. If it was a resource problem, this would probably only be resolved by the issue being taken up at Ministerial level. But it would be useful for you to raise this with CDS (you might have an opportunity for you to do this with the new CDS). Meanwhile I would be grateful if Robin could note down in future the details of any delays in the airbridge, which might help General Houghton in determining the resources versus priorities issue.

Separately, we are looking once again into the possibility of a private sector provider of such airbridge services. There are discussions also underway regarding the establishment of a US military airbridge between the Palace compound (where the Americans are accommodated) and Kuwait: we are exploring the possibility of our using this.

2. On a Baghdad related point, I should confirm that we have always viewed the old Embassy site as a potential card to use in securing long-term use of our present site, but to be played only if we can make no progress with the Iraqi authorities otherwise.

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