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IRAQ: SECURITY AND TROOP LEVELS

Security situation in Iraq varies from area to area: but we do not currently judge that Al Majar Al Kabir was the start of a trend, rather a local incident. UK troop requirements kept under review, but reinforcement not judged necessary at present. US troop levels may reduce in the autumn, and multinational contributions are beginning to flow in. The underlying problems do not lend themselves to a military solution. The key is delivering reconstruction across the country, and above all a political process that Iraqis feel they own.

In advance of the Prime Minister's VTC with President Bush tomorrow, you asked us to consider the troop levels which would be appropriate to support the security situation over time in Iraq.

In the two provinces in the UK's current Area of Operations (AO), although we are continuing to assess the intelligence on last week's events in Al Majar Al Kabir, we do not at this stage see these as the beginning of a trend, rather than as a local, albeit very serious, incident – and in itself an example of the way the security environment varies not only from region to region but also from town to town. We have been making good progress in getting the police and the judicial system back to work in our AO, and the attitude of most of the population towards UK forces remains neutral or positive in most areas. A similar situation applies in the two additional provinces which will come within the UK's expanded AO as the multinational force forms.

In the US AO, the security environment remains very difficult in places, particularly in and around Baghdad and Fallujah (a Sunni heartland). Over the weekend, there were some 40 hostile contacts in the US AO, resulting in the deaths of four US personnel and injuries to a further 17. There is some indication of increasing sophistication in the attacks on US forces, including

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the use of multiple Improvised Explosive Devices, although the techniques being employed are still relatively rudimentary.

On the credit side, the US Operation DESERT SCORPION, which has now been completed, resulted in the detention of some 1,330 hostile personnel, the seizure of some \$10M in cash and precious metals, and the securing of large caches of arms and ammunition. A similar, albeit smaller operation, Operation SIDEWINDER, is underway in the Samarra area (between Baghdad and Tikrit). And as the Prime Minister is aware, the US are working on plans (Operation THUNDERBOLT), whose development we are continuing to track,

You will also recall that at US request we recently deployed the British Army's Operational Pre-Tour Advisory Group (OPTAG) to Baghdad, to pass on UK expertise in peace support operations to US forces who are less experienced in this field. They have completed a number of well received training courses and seminars in Baghdad and are about to move to assist US forces in Tikrit.

We have considered whether troop reinforcements would make a difference, and if so whether it would be better to reinforce sooner rather than later. We are not in a position to judge US requirements - although General Franks' successor, General Abizaid stated yesterday that the current troop numbers were right; total numbers could come down after current offensive operations. This would occur at a similar time as the deployment of other Coalition partners into Iraq. We keep the position in the UK's AO (both current and expanded) under close review. At present, we continue to assess that we have the right size and shape of forces to do the job. The British Commander, General Wall is aware that reinforcements could be generated if he judged that they were needed.

It is unlikely that additional troops could provide a long-term solution to the underlying problems. In the short term, the presence of the armed forces will fill the gap in the security sector; the longer term focus must be on the continuing regeneration and reform of Iraqi capabilities, from policing to the armed forces. But more fundamentally, it appears to us that there is a growing frustration with the pace of reconstruction and the political process, and in particular with the degree of Iraqi ownership of that process. As long as this continues, the perceived lack of delivery from the Coalition and the International Community is bound to foster an increasingly oppositionist mentality, even amongst Iraqis with no love for the old regime. Already there is some evidence that the desire amongst some Iraqis for "democratisation" is running ahead of Bremer's political process. There is a real risk that we shall see the emergence of parallel political processes in Iraq: one Baghdad-centric, top-down and choreographed by Bremer; the other bottom-up, Iraqi and potentially hostile.

This is the CPA's business and not a problem that Coalition military forces can tackle. Indeed, our view is that increasing military forces at this stage could be counter-productive, fuelling the sense of "occupation" as opposed to any sense of "liberation". Indeed, if Iraqi frustration continues to grow, our

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military presence may well become increasingly unpopular and likely to be challenged. The consistent experience of the UK's Armed Forces in other theatres over several decades has underlined the vital importance of winning and maintaining the consent of the local population, so that they do not provide support to the men of violence. Maintaining consent in Iraq will depend primarily on meeting Iraqis' aspirations for their future. The key, therefore, remains progress on reconstruction and the political process, and the involvement and empowerment of Iraqis therein.

I am copying this letter to Simon McDonald (FCO), Anna Bewes (DfID), and Desmond Bowen (Cabinet Office).

Yours
Martyr

M J WILLIAMS
Private Secretary

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