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VISIT TO IRAQ: ADMINISTRATION POINTS

1. A couple of points came through very strongly during my visit to Basra and Baghdad last week.

HR Issues

2. We got strong pressure from FCO and other civilian staff both in Basra and Baghdad to be able to extend their tours beyond twelve months where people were willing and were coping well with the stress. In Baghdad in particular, a number of the younger FCO staff pointed out articulately that conditions had eased now that the number of incidents of incoming fire had reduced significantly. Although it was not a normal Posting, there was much less sense of present danger. Many staff felt highly motivated, and well able to cope with at least an extra six months if not a second year. They argued that they were just becoming fully effective at the time they have to leave, and felt that this policy was being imposed without Health and Welfare experts coming to Post and seeing conditions for themselves.
3. Separately, Christopher Prentice told me that he is very willing to extend for at least a six-month period.
4. I think it is now time to review our policy on this. Basra is clearly different, and staff there live in a highly military setting with very little opportunity for recreation. But the stresses in Baghdad are declining somewhat. At the very least, I think we need a Health and Welfare visit to Baghdad so that staff can discuss these issues direct with the experts who are laying down the policy. My own inclination would be to move soon to a policy of allowing staff to volunteer for a further six month period, subject to some form of screening/interview. Staff will point out that there are a large

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number of contractors living with them on the compound who have done three years or more, with no apparent effect on their mental wellbeing. Quite a head of steam is building up on this issue and it needs to be tackled.

5. In terms of staffing numbers, Christopher argued persuasively that the pace of work was increasing again as the prospects improved. He thought that in one or two cases the cuts in staffing had gone too far. I think this should be a priority for the extra staff slots that will become available from Americas Directorate or as a result of network rebalancing in the RAR.

Estates Issues

6. I saw the proposed site for the new Residence build. I was also able to discuss at length with Christopher Prentice, and to hear from him the intensity with which the current Residence is being used. Now that the situation is beginning to normalise in Baghdad, with the Ambassador playing a very significant political/ representational role, I am persuaded that we need to provision a new Embassy on the compound. I also found the arguments pretty persuasive that the cheapest and most effective way of doing this was to add it to the current programme of security works, which mean that we have contractors on site and working over the next few months.
7. I looked at some of the alternatives proposed, all of which are likely to be more expensive and were certainly no better than a reasonably austere new build.
8. The Investment Committee will need to look at the detailed business case. But I am persuaded that this needs to be done, and can probably be done most cheaply by adding it to the current works programme.



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