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IRAQ: SITUATION IN UK AREA OF OPERATIONS

Multinational Division (South East) fully operational in the four provinces. Recent incidents do not appear to be connected and do not appear to constitute a trend. Overall level of consent remains high. But it is clear that this will not last if Iraqis do not see tangible improvements soon, particularly in delivery of essential services. CENTCOM are trying to force the pace on this, but their efforts may not obviate the need for urgent and decisive cross-government UK activity in the South.

Multinational Division (South-East) (MND(SE)) has now been fully operational for some weeks, with the Italian-led brigade running Dhi Qar province and the Dutch battlegroup running Al Muthanna. UK forces continue to lead in Basrah and Maysan. Most of the subordinate contributors to MND(SE) are also now in place.

Security Situation

Recent incidents leading to the deaths of three soldiers in Basrah on Saturday and one more in Maysan last night are still being investigated. It is possible that both attacks were opportunistic, although last night's incident may have been related to the arrest of a local militia leader which took place immediately beforehand. We do not currently perceive any linkage to previous incidents at such as at Al Majar al Kabir, and we have no reason at this stage to suppose that they represent a trend.

MND(SE) are conducting a Forces and Resources Review which will assess whether they require any additional capabilities, whether vehicles, technical advice, or additional troops. We will also look at the scope for accelerating the use of Iraqi guards. At present, partly because of the current difficulties with infrastructure, the majority of our military effort is being diverted

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to static guarding and escorting tasks, and this is severely constraining our ability to operate proactively and make a positive difference to the security environment.

In the meantime, force protection measures and operating procedures remain under constant review, and commanders on the ground are best-placed to judge what their day-to-day activities require. Whilst some adjustments may be appropriate (for instance in the management of vehicle convoys), we must recognise that our policy of engagement with the local people will always involve an element of risk, which cannot be eradicated without defeating the object of our presence there.

Despite recent incidents, we judge that the vast majority of the population in MND(SE) continues to consent to the presence of the coalition. We also judge, however, that this level of consent is fragile and time-limited. A number of local leaders have made it clear to UK forces that they believe we have a finite period in which to demonstrate that we are delivering tangible improvements to the daily lives of the population.

Infrastructure

The nub of the problem is the failure to deliver an adequate (even to pre-war standards) level of essential services – for example electricity, water, and fuel. In part, of course, this reflects the long neglect of the South under Saddam, and the problems have been compounded by sabotage and smuggling. But the local population simply does not believe that the coalition, with the resources and technical know-how of the US and UK, could not have fixed this by now. Two weeks ago we came close to outbreaks of mass disorder in Basrah over this issue, and it was only with difficulty, and the active co-operation of local leaders, that the situation was defused. It is clear that this is no more than a temporary reprieve. This issue now goes to the heart of the coalition's credibility, and its ability to maintain the consent of the Iraqi people. Moreover, we are in no doubt that continuing failure to resolve it will progressively increase the risk to UK forces and other UK personnel in Iraq. It is worth noting that the number of UK Servicemen killed by enemy action since the beginning of May is now greater than the number killed during major combat operations in March and April.

Frustrated by what they see as the CPA's failure to tackle these issues across Iraq CENTCOM have been holding a conference in Tampa this week focussing specifically on infrastructure issues. In parallel, we have been seeking advice from MND(SE) and the consultants Mott McDonald on projects that could be undertaken to provide short-term improvements. Although we await a full read-out from Tampa, the indications so far are that it is unlikely to produce proposals which will help the South in the short term, and the case for urgent bilateral action is therefore strong. Initial advice from MND(SE) identifies projects costing some £60M, which we understand should be capable of being funded from within existing CPA(South) and UK resources. These issues will be considered further at a meeting of the Reconstruction group led by DFID tomorrow, with a view to advising the 4 September meeting of the Ad Hoc Ministerial Group.

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I am copying this letter to Geoffrey Adams (FCO), Moazzim Malik (DfID),
(HMT), (DTI) and Desmond Bowen (Cabinet Office).

Yours

M. J. Williams

M J WILLIAMS
Private Secretary

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