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01004/02 Jc



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SECRETARY OF STATE

2) DQ

Passed to PM at DOP (I) today.
We shall reply, agreeing to withdraw
in March in May 06, subject to
US/ANZ/JAP agreement.

MSU 4/5/2C

10 November 2005

cc: ~~DEF~~ / SWK

NS 15/xi

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See light of recent public statements

Military judgement remains that it would, in principle, be possible to handover responsibility for security to the Iraqis in Al Muthanna and Maysan provinces by around February 2006. This conforms with the indicative timeline discussed at DOP(I) in July. Two political factors complicate this assessment and imply extending the timeline: the failure so far of the Iraqi Government to set out the political and public context for transition; and the strong desire of the US to keep a Japanese presence in Iraq, combined with Japanese unwillingness to move from Al Muthanna.

Against this background, Prime Minister Ja'afari has agreed the conditions set by the Joint Committee to Transfer Security Responsibility (JCTSR). The Iraqi National Security Adviser is now working on a public handling strategy and the release of a summary of the conditions. The second phase of the transition process (the assessment of provinces and cities that are likely to move to Iraqi security control) is unlikely to begin until after the elections in December. The speed of formation of the next Government will affect the timing of JCTSR endorsement of provincial transfer of security responsibility. We assess that this is unlikely before February next year. While it is clear that the new Iraqi Government will share our desire to demonstrate progress on handover, we must take care about assuming that their priorities for transfer will match ours.

The Rt Hon Tony Blair MP
The Prime Minister

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Our current timeline assessment is that May 2006 is the point at which we should aim to have completed our exit from Al Muthanna and Maysan provinces, rather than around February, which our plans originally envisaged.

The Japanese determination, to stay in Al Muthanna will detain UK forces in that province for at least four months longer than we would have wished. The Japanese estimate that it will take three to four months to drawdown and leave. It will be important to work with the Japanese, to aim for withdrawal during May 2006 rather than commence their withdrawal from this point. This would match Australians planned timescale for completion of their mission in Muthanna. On the other hand, we also want to keep the Japanese in the coalition. We therefore need to continue to work with the US and Japanese to find imaginative ways of doing so without unnecessarily tying down UK forces where there is no military need to do so.

The extension to the timeline for the handover of security to the Iraqis in MND(SE) has force level implications. Assuming security conditions allow, reductions in UK force numbers which might have been possible from around February might now be deferred to early summer (May), when we should be able to reduce our troop numbers in MND(SE).

I am prepared to accept this as the inevitable consequence of the political factors described above. But I would be reluctant to contemplate further extensions to the timeline which have the consequence of fixing UK forces in theatre where there is no overwhelming security need.

I am copying this to Jack Straw, Hilary Benn and Des Browne.



JOHN REID

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