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8 file

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3rd April 2006

Dear CGS,

Having just returned from Iraq where I spent time in Basra, Maysan and Al Muthanna I am writing to update you on the mood and dynamics I picked up in Theatre.

In terms of the general atmosphere John Cooper is broadly optimistic on both security and political progress; the move to transition is not yet a done deal - and may yet fail - but the signs are good. Success in Maysan, Al Muthanna and Dhi Qar remain key to setting the conditions for transition in Basra and our eventual extraction. What was very evident however is that we are on the cusp now of consent turning to qualified tolerance in Maysan and Al Muthanna - and if we fail to meet the proposed locally-derived timelines for transition, we should expect that tolerance to erode into more widespread opposition. Transition in the summer will be an expression of mission success, transition delayed for wider reasons risks turning that success into unnecessary political and security challenges. The need exists to reassure the US and the Iraqi Government that we remain on side and are not withdrawing prematurely, and we must emphasise hard that our move represents a change in posture and not capability or intent. That we remain committed - same mission, same intent, albeit a varying scheme of manoeuvre with the Operational Overwatch Battlegroups (OOBGs) - needs to be reinforced with our coalition partners and the Iraqis at all levels.

By province, relative to Al Muthanna, Maysan remains the more demanding operating environment; we need to retain the capability to provide a presence on the border periodically, which will help to alleviate US concerns about the Iranian flank during transition. The MITT (supported by an AI Company Group) should remain once the Battlegroup extracts for a short period, perhaps 3-6 months. Al Muthanna is very different - if transition is delayed it will become difficult to stay without multiplying the forces in opposition to us. The MITT's job is now largely complete and the UK Task Group can extract completely. The Australians plan to move East to Talil and operate forward from there when we extract to

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Basra. A strong line from all was that we must not be fixed by the Japanese, but the Australians will have to stay if they do. As you know, John Abizaid visited the AO recently and agreed that the Japanese need to move in May 06 and we should reinforce this view in Washington, Tokyo and Baghdad. The next key DP for the Japanese is in mid-April when they will decide on their relief-in-place; we need to influence this decision now.

Migrating to an over-watch posture inevitably raises the issue of the ISTAR capability that needs to exist for the triggering of the OOBGs. There is already a significant capability gap that is periodically filled by [*] and US systems, but the withdrawal of Phoenix will reduce our dedicated deployed capability still further. I believe that we need to look quickly at how to meet the ISTAR requirement that successful over-watch operations will demand. PJHQ is casting an eye over this in order to establish the parameters of the requirement. We at LAND will also look at the options, which might include contracting for product rather than procure a system per se. I was interested to note that the Australians have already started on this and are looking to procure a tactical UAV; possibly Scan Eagle – a system which I understand the Royal Navy has been trialling recently.

I was also struck by the repeated observation that "money is a weapon". Relatively small amounts of funding used at the discretion of commanders on activities and projects that leverage consent, would add very significantly to maintaining influence and stability in the transition period. This is not new, and is not what DFID resources are intended for, but we need to make the case again that money does play a part in enabling our objectives as much as physical presence and Information Operations. We can already see that the same principles will apply for our deployment to Afghanistan. The trilogy of muscle, message and money is quite a useful shorthand in a counter-insurgency setting.

Another older lesson is being writ large in Basra; the use of aviation top cover is having a significant deterrent effect in enabling movement and the follow-up to incidents. Already busy aviation task lines mean that top cover comes at a price, which will escalate during the forthcoming relief in place between 7 Brigade and 20 Brigade. I will get Gary Coward to examine the options with PJHQ to include the possibility of changing the aircraft mix (perhaps using Gazelle, accepting that there will be issues over the DAS fit). It is not the first time that the efficacy of a "City Flight" has been raised. I anticipate the volume of support for more top cover to be turned up by those in theatre in the coming weeks.

We also need to close with the design of the composite Divisional Headquarters post 3 (UK) Division. John and his team must start to look at the structure now, but it will fall to Richard Shirreff to morph it into the future MND (SE) for the long term. This will mean integrating and drawing it down to the 2 Star-led Brigade Headquarters-plus size that we envisage. The thorough scrub of the manpower requirements that this implies will aid our ability to field the composite ARRC replacement and augment HQ 12 Mech Bde as HQ MNB (S) in Afghanistan concurrently in early 2007.

In sum this was a most useful and timely visit – we need to be bold in our moves to enable transition: any delay risks turning broad consent into something more aligned to overt opposition – and we will take more casualties, perhaps unnecessarily. But key to this remains the need for strong reassurance to the Americans that we remain committed to the task in hand and are there for the long haul. With regard to Maysan and Al Muthanna they must understand the message: same mission, same intent, but an adjusted scheme of manoeuvre.

Finally, and as a post-script, I came back via Kuwait where our own relatively new Ambassador, Stewart Laing, hosted a dinner for my party. In conversation with the three Kuwaiti guests I picked up nothing but major nervousness and pessimism about current events in Iraq and serious worries about spillover into the wider region. This is probably not new, but remains salutary. However, what I found more relevant was the damage to the

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* [UK theatre forces]

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UK's standing in Kuwait for failing to have exercised more influence over the direction of Coalition planning in 2003 and subsequently. Confidence in the UK has been shaken - an atmospheric confirmed to me by both Jim Baxter and Simon Tustin, the DA.

I hope these comments are useful
given your meeting with George Long this
week.

Yours ever,
R. L. I
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