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REPORT OF MY VISIT TO BAGHDAD

You were keen for me to visit Iraq to ensure that British business expertise does not get overlooked in the reconstruction work in Iraq and that Iraqi women are being properly involved in the political process. I addressed both issues in a full programme when I went to Baghdad on Wednesday 9 July.

This was an extremely valuable visit which enabled me to see at first hand, albeit very briefly, what it is like in Baghdad and to give support to the women of Iraq and to British business.

I was able to get to Baghdad in time to address the plenary session of the "Voice of Women of Iraq" conference, which included some of the Iraqi exiles in Britain with whom Ann Clwyd and I have been working. This was an important event organised, run and managed by the Iraqi women but with the backing and support of the CPA, especially a secondee to the CPA from my Department's Women and Equality Unit (WEU) without whom the event would simply not have happened. In addition to speaking at the plenary session, I participated in one of the workshops looking at constitutional and democracy issues, had lunch with the attendees and private discussions with the steering group who had led the conference. I and some of the Iraqi women gave interviews to NBC, BBC (the "PM" programme and the World Service) and to journalists from UK and local newspapers.

Paula Dobriansky, the Under Secretary for Global Affairs at the State Department also addressed the conference.

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In the circumstances the turnout was impressive both in numbers, quality and diversity of participants. This was, of course, only the start of the process of ensuring that women are fully engaged in the reconstruction of Iraq and the political process. I am also conscious that most of the women present on the 9th were well-educated professionals and that every effort must be made to ensure that women from all communities have the chance to participate in the reconstruction. However, the strong representation of professional women reflects the fact that more than half of Iraqi doctors, teachers and financial services staff are women and the reconstruction of Iraq will depend on them.

When I met Paul Bremer in the afternoon I pressed him to ensure that at least 5 of the 25 people on the planned Governing Council should be women. Although he took note of this, Bremer also said that the political parties in Iraq were not putting forward women in spite of their promises to do so. In particular, the Kurds, who have several women within the government and judiciary in northern Iraq, failed to agree a woman nominee.

I now note that only 3 women have actually been appointed to the Council. This will be a major disappointment to the in-country and exiled Iraq women who had expected a stronger voice. All of us will need to keep pressing this message with Bremer and others in the US Administration to ensure that there is substantial women's representation in future political structures. I also impressed on Bremer the need to continue to provide support to the women who are appointed since without such support and in the absence of party political structures behind them, they will quickly become marginalised.

In addition to participating in the women's conference and meeting Bremer, I was joined by a scoping mission from British Trade International's Iraq Industry Working Group. Together we visited the CPA's Business Support and Facilitation Centre (brainchild of a UK secondee) and had discussions with senior officials of the new Ministries of Industry and Trade about trade and investment promotion and economic reform. We will be following up that visit with offers of further practical support in the form of material to stock the Centre. The Iraqi senior officials were clearly very keen to make use of UK experience in economic reform and privatisation both at home and in other markets such as Eastern Europe and I hope that we can follow up this interest with specific offers of expertise from both the public and private sectors.

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"... process of ensuring that women are fully engaged in the reconstruction of..."

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The scoping mission joined me for my meeting with US members of the CPA economics team where I was able to press for the interim budget to be finalised and to discuss the handling of vested/seized assets. The Americans agreed that all Iraqi assets had to be disbursed through transparent international tender but suggested this might give rise to some tensions where there was a need for speed. We also discussed the need to get a procurement expert into the CPA quickly (not least to ensure that not all contracts go to US firms).

In my meeting with Bremer, without the scoping mission, I pressed for early sight of Bechtel's needs assessment and also raised our concerns about the way that proposals (for sub-contract work) from Siemens UK and Balfour Beatty were being handled by Bechtel. Bremer undertook to look into these (he clearly shared our concerns about Bechtels' ability to push matters along).

I should make special mention of the UK secondees to the CPA with whom I had a separate meeting. They are very impressive and are doing excellent work in very trying circumstances. They need all the support we can give them. We also need to ensure that there is a supply of other good people to go out there, either in addition to those already in Iraq or to replace those who are returning. For example, the current WEU secondee to the CPA is due to return to the UK in August. It will be very important to ensure that she is replaced. I understand that DFID are already exploring the possibility of getting such a replacement to ensure that initiatives to incorporate gender into all aspects of reconstruction can be taken forward.

More generally, we need to ensure that we are seconding sufficiently senior people to the CPA. This is not a criticism of those who are there - indeed the point was made to me by our people. However it was noticeable that the US are sending out more senior people than we are and this can put our own people at a disadvantage when it comes to ensuring that the UK and European points of view are taken into account.

On the way back to London on Wednesday evening, Chris Wilton, our Ambassador in Kuwait, arranged a useful reception for me to meet British business people and others engaged- or planning to be - in reconstruction work and humanitarian aid in Iraq.

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I am very grateful for the advice and support from all those who made this visit possible in difficult circumstances, especially Chris Segar and John Sawers, DI ID, MOD, Special Branch and others in London and in Baghdad.

I am copying this to Jack Straw, Geoff Hoon, Valerie Amos and Andrew Turnbull.

PP Patricia Hewitt
11 July 2003

(Approved by the Secretary of State and signed in her absence)

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