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To: PARIX - eTelegrams
From: COMCEN Gateway 2
Subject: OUTTELS:OO:REST:IRAQ: FRENCH REACTION TO 7 MARCH
DEBATE:PARIS/FCOLN-10155558
Sent: 10 March 2003 15:50:45 GMT

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CABINET OFFICE FOR MANNING AND RYCROFT, NO 10

SUBJECT: IRAQ: FRENCH REACTION TO 7 MARCH DEBATE

SUMMARY

1. French believe they have the momentum. Blix's comment on needing "months" played into their hands. They are pulling out all the diplomatic stops. Villepin is trying the personal touch in Africa. Chirac is canvassing support for his idea that Heads of State meet in New York for the vote. Even Balladur has come out in support of a French veto. The press and public are firmly behind Chirac. For the moment, the French are impervious to our arguments, but that could still change if it looks as if we might secure the nine votes and avoid Russian and Chinese vetoes.

DETAIL

2. After events in New York on 7 March, the French think that the debate is continuing to move in their direction. They agree with Blix's comments about Iraqi cooperation on substance as well as process. They are glad that El-Baradei has confirmed their long-standing view that Iraq no longer has a nuclear programme. They believe that the UNMOVIC and IAEA reports will have made it more difficult for us to secure nine votes. Their aims remain (a) to persuade us not to go to a vote, (b) if this does not work, to stop us from securing nine votes, and (c) if there are nine votes, to ensure that they have Russian and Chinese company in vetoing.

3. With these aims in mind, they are on the diplomatic offensive. Villepin is visiting Angola, Cameroon and Guinea today. He and

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Chirac clearly believe that personal intervention might deliver abstentions, at least from Angola and Cameroon. And Chirac is working the phones on the proposal (on which the Elysee has been briefing) that Heads of State meet in New York for the vote. He appears already to have Schroeder on board. We assume that he is working hard on Russia and China. If Chirac casts his veto in person in New York this would raise the profile dramatically, not least in Franco-US terms, despite continuing French claims that bilateral relations are an entirely different issue. Chirac must calculate that a common Franco-Russian-Chinese front in New York would save him from too much American blow-back.

4. Raffarin has been appealing for European cohesion ("we must not let Iraq kill Europe"). FAC Chairman Balladur has now come out in favour of a French veto ("I don't see how we can do otherwise - it is our partners' behaviour that has brought us here").

5. The French papers are in little doubt that "Chirac is ready to veto" (headline in Journal du Dimanche) and are excited at the prospect of his going to New York to do it personally. Le Monde supports "France's no to an ultimatum". Its editorial argues that to push the UN to approve military action that is already a foregone conclusion would be to undermine the UN. Figaro profiles the "ultimate diplomatic battle", pointing up the irony of a situation where the "forgotten continent" of Africa holds the key to the success or failure of the UK/US approach at the UN. Liberation predicts a Pyrrhic victory for Bush, saying that he may have no idea who Pyrrhus was but may find himself in a position where military might ends up being undermined by erosion of US public support. Parisien asks whether French people think France has gone too far - the vox pop answer is a resounding no. Chirac meanwhile is planning to milk the media and public support for all it is worth - he will be on prime time TV (TF1 and France 2) this evening.

COMMENT

6. Although the French have still so far steered clear of saying in so many words that they will veto, it is hard to interpret their comments and approach in any other way. The US Embassy here are of the same opinion, advising Washington that Chirac is on course to veto. It is getting increasingly difficult for the French to backtrack now, having built up so many expectations domestically and internationally. Whilst we are both fully engaged in our respective lobbying campaigns there is little we can say to them likely to have much impact. Denis MacShane and I took part in separate hour-long TV debates over the weekend to argue that we should take issue with Saddam not with Bush. While there is some sympathy here for the moral case for bringing Saddam into line, and a few lone voices supporting military intervention if necessary, nearly all politicians and commentators, as well as public opinion, strongly support the current French stand. The reasoned arguments from commentators like Moisi in today's FT, that war is inevitable and we must ensure the international community unites to win the peace, have not so far found much resonance.

7. I doubt if benchmarks and a little more time will do the trick with the French, so long as they are not satisfied on the

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automaticity point. That said, the dynamics may yet change this week. If the French really do begin to look for a way out of a veto at some stage, an amended text might just provide a latter. In any case, going to a vote without at least some Prime Ministerial contact with Chirac would in my view be odd. If it looks as though we have the nine votes and might persuade Russia and China not to veto, a serious phone call would be well worth a try - if only to ease the way for cooperation in the aftermath.

Contact

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