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TELNO 53
OF 132056Z MARCH 03

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FROM PRIVATE SECRETARY

SUBJECT: NOSEC: IRAQ: FOREIGN SECRETARY'S CONVERSATION WITH FRENCH
FOREIGN MINISTER, 13 MARCH

SUMMARY

1. Villepin willing to consider any new proposals which don't contain automaticity. Foreign Secretary sets out difficulties caused by Chirac's comments on 10 March.

DETAIL

2. French Foreign Minister Villepin telephoned the Foreign Secretary in the evening of 13 March.

3. Villepin said that France was still willing to consider any new proposals. He was ready to discuss any solution based on benchmarks. He was ready to discuss any timetable, even a reduced one, if that was "satisfactory for you and the US". His bottom line focused on automaticity. France could work on any mechanism which contained an ultimatum as long as it was the Security Council which took full responsibility at the end of any deadline.

4. The Foreign Secretary said that, first, he wanted to stress his appreciation for Villepin's reaction following the UNSC meeting on 7 March. He was grateful for Villepin telling the press conference that his personal relations with the Foreign Secretary were strong. Villepin agreed: there may be political differences from time to time, but their relationship was very good.

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5. The Foreign Secretary said that Chirac's statement on 10 March that France would vote against a second resolution "whatever the circumstances" had caused great difficulties. It was clear that France would veto. Villepin said that Chirac had never said that. Chirac had not meant that France would not try to find common ground. He had not meant that, whatever happened, France would vote no. His comments came only in the context of the text on the table as of 10 March.

6. The Foreign Secretary said that he read the comments differently. It had made life very difficult in the US. They had assumed France would vote no in any circumstances. As a result they were now falling back on UNSCR 1441. The UK had, however, managed to keep dialogue going through the weekend. The UK had never said that 1441 contained automaticity. If that had been the case, 1441 would have led to immediate assessment of Saddam and then military action. The Foreign Secretary was glad 1441 had led to the current process. But the UK did not want Iraq stringing things out. If things went on too long, the military threat was degraded.

7. Villepin asked whether a point of compromise could not be found. The Security Council could meet, following a report of the inspectors, to decide what should be done - perhaps in one month, two months or perhaps just three weeks? Such a discussion would not be within the "context of automaticity". The judge of any material breach should be the inspectors.

8. The Foreign Secretary pointed out the workings of 1441. The key decision had to be made by the Security Council. The inspectors role was to provide evidence, although others could too. It was clear that Iraq was in material breach. Though there were many different positions within the Security Council, no one on 10 March had said that Saddam Hussein was complying with his obligations. He was therefore in further material breach.

9. The Foreign Secretary briefly described the importance of the UK's new benchmarks. Unless Iraq realised it was facing its final, final chance, the international community would not get Iraq to face reality. Put bluntly, delay played into the hands of those in the US who said we should not go down the UN route. That said, he was happy to see any new propositions at any time. Villepin said that it might not be best for any new proposal to come from France. It would be better coming from others. But a way forward could be found.

10. The Foreign Secretary said that there would have to be discussion of these issues at Heads of Government level, though not in New York. The Foreign Secretary and Villepin agreed to keep in touch.

STRAW