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SECRETARY OF STATE

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20 September 2002

*Dear David,***IRAQ: POTENTIAL UK CONTRIBUTION TO ANY MILITARY ACTION****Summary**

Further developments in US planning for Iraq. Options for UK maritime and air package evolving satisfactorily. Further work necessary to examine viability of a ground force element: advice by early October. But at least one publicly visible measure needed next week to avoid foreclosing this option in the meantime. Recommendation that this is foreshadowed in Prime Minister's statement to the House on Tuesday. Further preparatory steps, some involving expenditure, will need to follow very soon thereafter.

Detail

My letter of 6 September set out our provisional assessment of the factors informing decisions on any UK military contribution to any military operations against Iraq. In the light of the Defence Secretary's discussion with the Prime Minister on 8 September and further developments in US thinking, we have continued to refine our work on potential UK force contributions, including a medium scale land force contribution. There are now two issues we need to address quickly:

1. what potential UK force contributions to present to a US military planning conference next week; and
2. whether to replace Army units already allocated to Operation FRESCO so that they would be available for a land force contribution if approved.

Sir David Manning KCMG
Foreign Policy Adviser to the Prime Minister

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UK Military Contribution

Further work on the air and maritime (plus Special Forces) package - Package 2 of my letter of 6 September - has confirmed that this would be a significant and useful contribution to US forces. As an adjunct to this package, we might also offer a Commando Group of around 1700 Royal Marines for early operations in Southern Iraq (although further work is necessary to establish whether we could sustain this in parallel with mounting ground operations in Northern Iraq). The Defence Secretary believes that we should present Package 2 as a potential UK contribution at the CENTCOM planning conference. Although we would emphasise that we were presenting this for planning purposes only, it will inevitably lead to US making firm assumptions on what the UK would offer in due course. Not to show our hand at this stage would effectively exclude us from further US planning and it would be very difficult to re-enter the process later.

The question of a ground contribution in addition to Package 2 is more complicated. US thinking on the balance of ground forces between operations in northern and southern Iraq has developed since my last letter.

With its associated support, the UK land contribution to a US-UK combined force in the North would entail a commitment of around 28000 service personnel (on top of the 13000 personnel in package 2). Having considered possible alternatives, the Chiefs of Staff are clear that this would be the minimum sensible UK ground contribution to operations in the North. A smaller

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force could not be integrated properly with US forces and would be unable adequately to sustain and defend itself.

This option requires further work. The Chiefs of Staff are yet to be convinced of the military viability of the US plan; the role of Turkey is far from being settled; and there are significant concerns over our ability to establish robust lines of communication and supply. Importantly, we have not yet completed a critical path analysis of the latest dates at which we could take the key precursor decisions required by this option. In particular, it would require the compulsory call-out of around 6000 reservists (to match current US timelines, this decision would need to be taken and announced in). We also need to weigh the serious implications for our ability to provide forces to meet other contingencies and the significant cost premium entailed by this option.

Against this background, the Defence Secretary feels it would be premature to present this possible land contribution to the US planning conference on the same basis as Package 2. But he believes we should indicate to CENTCOM that we are still considering this option and that they should model two plans in parallel, one including the UK land force contribution and one without it. Once the further work is completed by early October, we will be able to advise the US on whether or not a land force contribution can be assumed.

Implications for Operation FRESCO

We have considered what we need to do in order to keep open this option in the meantime. The most pressing issue relates to Operation FRESCO. Planning for FRESCO started in the early Summer,

Some 15 of the 36 Army units required for a the land force contribution are currently allocated to FRESCO and need to be removed from it if we are not to foreclose this option. Such a decision would be publicly visible: the 15 units (some 7500 personnel) would assume that they were being removed from FRESCO in readiness for another operation. Another 15 units would have to begin training for FRESCO at short notice and there would be unpalatable knock-on effects for others, such as extended operational tour lengths. Moreover, if we are to meet the current requirement of having all of our Green Goddesses manned with trained crews by 24 October, we need to reallocate units by no later than Wednesday 25 September. This is because of the limited number of qualified trainers and suitable Green Goddesses on which to train.

The Defence Secretary believes that we will need to prepare the way for this decision publicly in advance. The best opportunity to do so would be in the Prime Minister's statement to the House on Tuesday, by making clear that - as part of the Government's policy that the will of United Nations must ultimately be backed up by the threat of force - the Ministry of Defence will be taking some prudent contingency measures to avoid foreclosing military options should the need arise.

Mr Hoon recognises that such an acknowledgement will fuel media speculation about more significant military preparations. It also carries the further risk that

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there may be claims that we are undermining FRESCO in order to get ready for a war against Iraq (but we can explain that, by taking early decisions now, we are ensuring that all Green Goddesses can be manned with fully trained crews throughout the strike). There is also a practical necessity here: public acknowledgement that the MOD is involved in contingency work on military options for Iraq would enable us, for example, to begin discreet discussions with industry to define more precisely the estimated cost and timescales of a limited number of urgent operational requirements. This work is becoming increasingly urgent in any event. If we do not acknowledge it publicly, there is a clear risk of the information leaking, leading to accusations that we had been less than open with Parliament.

I am copying this letter to Simon McDonald (FCO), Mark Bowman (Treasury) and to Ian Fletcher and Desmond Bowen (Cabinet Office).

*Yours**Peter*

P D WATKINS
Private Secretary

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