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From the Secretary of State

The Rt Hon Tony Blair MP  
Prime Minister  
10 Downing Street  
London SW1A 2AA

14 February 2003

Dear Prime Minister,

**IRAQ: HUMANITARIAN PLANNING AND THE ROLE OF THE UN**

Situation of the Iraqi people already extremely fragile. Any disruption could lead to a humanitarian catastrophe. With some more time, sensible measures can be taken to reduce these risks and improve Iraq's prospects for stability after conflict. Such measures would also help persuade the Iraqi people - as well as neighbouring countries and the British public - that we have their concerns at heart.

At our meeting yesterday morning I agreed to send you a letter setting out key humanitarian issues and some thoughts on the UN's role which we need to pursue with the US. The vulnerability of the Iraqi people to humanitarian catastrophe should not be underestimated. With the world's second biggest oil reserves, a strong economic base from the 1970s on which to build and a highly educated population, Iraq should be an upper middle or high income country. Instead its average earnings have plummeted in the last two decades, its population is largely dependent on food handouts, its agricultural sector operating way below capacity. Iraqi people's lives are perilously fragile - their private coping strategies worn away by years of misrule; the public facilities to help them cope, run down often to the point of uselessness. The UN sanctions which Saddam has exploited to create this tragedy were never designed to go on for this long. The situation in the centre and south of Iraq is much worse than in the north, which is subject to the same sanctions but outside Saddam's control. I attach some brief statistics showing this.

US preparations to date have been dominated by military considerations. Plans for the provision of humanitarian assistance during and following any conflict appear quite comprehensive, but rely on naive assumptions that there will be no major problems and that conflict will be swift. In addition, they presume that other humanitarian actors, including UN agencies and NGOs, will be content to work under US direction. Many of those actors will not do so.

More can be done to factor humanitarian considerations into planning and to increase the chance of avoiding the worst disasters. Coordination between the US and other agencies could be significantly increased. Plans must be developed to provide as much assistance as possible to communities which may be affected by chemical or biological weapons. More thought must be given to the capacity of the port at Umm-Qasr to process humanitarian as well as military supplies. Targeting to avoid infrastructure critical to the delivery of basic services can be further refined. The risks of deadly levels of hydrogen sulphide from exploded oil wells suffocating the 100,000 people in around Kirkuk must be better assessed and campaign objectives adjusted to reflect that if necessary.

There is also much more which can be done

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There is also much more which can be done now to assist the prospects for Iraq's relief and reconstruction after any conflict. The need for a lead UN role is critical. In terms of relief, we and the US are agreed on the importance of re-establishing the UN Oil For Food distribution networks, on which 60% of the Iraqi people are dependent, as soon as possible. This will be much easier if the UN is centrally involved, leading coordination of the various UN agencies and international NGOs responding to the crisis. We cannot afford to lose the UN's expertise and legitimacy.

Most importantly, a lead UN role also significantly increases the chances of substantial contributions to Iraq's reconstruction from other countries who may not fund a US-led operation. We need such support for political, technical and financial reasons; if there is significant damage to Iraq's oil and other infrastructure during a military campaign, the costs could run into tens of billions of dollars in the first few years. As a team of UK officials set out in their proposal for a distinct UN role to the NSC in Washington last week, such a role in no way needs to cut across the coalition forces' control of military and security issues, which will be essential to restore and maintain order. The proposal did not receive a warm reception.

The prospects of providing coordinated and comprehensive assistance to the Iraqi people in re-building their lives and their country will be greatly enhanced by a second UN Security Council resolution. Such a resolution should address the UN's lead role after conflict and underline the prioritisation of humanitarian considerations. This would give the maximum authority for any military action and would facilitate financial burden-sharing for relief and reconstruction. And it would make the resolution itself more attractive to sceptical members of the Security Council.

As we discussed, within such an agreed international effort there is a great opportunity for the UK to play an exemplary humanitarian role in any sector of Iraq under British control, in addition to our support for the nation-wide effort. DFID and MOD officials will be discussing this further with the Chiefs of the Defence Staff on 19 February. But as I made clear in my letter of 5 February, my Department has tight budgetary constraints. We have major humanitarian disasters across the world and my resources are stretched. I am happy to prioritise Iraq from my contingency reserve but I cannot take resources from other poor and needy people to assist post-conflict Iraq. Without some understanding on finance, I cannot responsibly commit DFID to the exemplary partnership with MOD which we discussed.

I am copying this letter to Gordon Brown, Geoff Hoon and Jack Straw.

Yours sincerely,

*C. Warren*

*C* CLARE SHORT  
(Agreed by the Secretary of State  
and signed in her absence)

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