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From the Assistant Private Secretary

14 March 2003

Dear Kara

**IRAQ: PRIME MINISTER'S CONVERSATION WITH PRESIDENT
CHIRAC, 14 MARCH**

The Prime Minister spoke to President Chirac on 14 March, at Chirac's request.

Chirac referred to the Prime Minister's conversation with French Prime Minister Raffarin the previous day. He did not want disagreements over Iraq to impact on the UK and France's joint interests in Europe. It would be helpful to have some contact before the 20 March European Council. The Prime Minister agreed.

Chirac said that France was content to proceed "in the logic of UNSCR 1441"; but it could not accept an ultimatum or any "automaticity" of recourse to force. He therefore proposed that we look at a new SCR, in line with SCR 1441, provided that it excluded these options. Was this still possible?

The Prime Minister said that we needed clear, specific "tests" to measure whether Saddam was co-operating. Of the six tests we had proposed, five were from the Blix "clusters" report and the sixth had been proposed by the inspectors and was intended to provide a mechanism for junior Iraqi officials and scientists to co-operate with the inspectors. The whole point of UNSCR 1441 was that action must be taken if there was no Iraqi co-operation. So, with our draft, action must follow if Saddam failed to meet the tests. If there were no ultimatum, then if Saddam failed the test, the sole result would be another debate, endlessly postponing the decision. The Prime Minister commented that he had been saddened by the divisions in the Security Council.

Chirac suggested that the UNMOVIC work programme might provide a way forward. France was prepared to look at reducing the 120-day time frame it envisaged. The Prime Minister said that this still did not get around the problem

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that if Saddam was found to be in breach, all that followed was more discussion and we were back where we started. It must be clear that if the tests were not met, action would ensue.

French
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question

Chirac asked who should decide whether Saddam had co-operated: the inspectors or the Security Council? The Prime Minister insisted that it must be the Security Council. Chirac agreed, although the Security Council should make its judgement on the basis of the inspectors' report. He wondered whether it would be worth the Foreign Secretary and Villepin discussing the situation to see if we could find some flexibility, provided there was no ultimatum or automaticity. Or was this too late? The Prime Minister said that every avenue must be explored. Chirac said that talking direct was better than via TV and radio broadcasts.

Chirac concluded by repeating that he wanted to phone the Prime Minister before the 20 March European Council. He wanted to handle this in the positive spirit of the Prime Minister's recent exchanges with Schroeder and Raffarin. The Prime Minister said that he too did not want things to become more difficult. He wanted to ensure that the strength of the UK/France relationship was not affected.

I am copying this letter to Peter Watkins (MoD), John Scarlett and Desmond Bowen (Cabinet Office), PS/C, Sir John Holmes (Paris), Sir Paul Lever, Sir Nigel Sheinwald (UKRep Brussels), Tony Brenton (Washington), Sir Jeremy Greenstock (UKMis New York) and Sir Emyr Jones Parry (UKDel NATO).

Yours sincerely



NICHOLAS CANNON

Kara Owen
FCO