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

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