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Written Ministerial Statements

Monday 16 June 2003

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Iraq (Humanitarian Situation)

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Hilary Benn): The immediate humanitarian situation in Iraq is improving, although many challenges lie ahead. DFID's contribution to this effort is significant. We have already committed £115 million to support the work of humanitarian agencies in the current crisis; £99 million of this has been allocated to specific activities through United Nations agencies (£63.8 million), the Red Cross and Red Crescent (£32 million) and NGOs (£3.4 million). These are the organisations best placed to deliver humanitarian assistance where it is most needed. We have also set aside a further £95 million to meet additional needs as they emerge. DFID teams on the ground in Baghdad and Basra are working with the Coalition Provisional Authority and UK military, and helping to co-ordinate the humanitarian effort.

Progress is being made. Basra now has as much water as it did before the conflict; all 12 main hospitals in Baghdad are functioning; rubbish is being removed from the streets of Baghdad and Basra; the food distribution system is working again and has sufficient pipeline stocks of the main commodities; electricity supply systems are being repaired; public sector salaries are being paid; and Iraqi policemen are returning to duty.

Much remains to be done however. One of the most critical challenges is ensuring law and order, and managing the security sector to ensure that the Iraqi police and armed forces are reformed effectively, and that demobilised soldiers are reintegrated properly into civilian life. More needs to be done to improve Iraq's capacity to provide its people with basic services such as health, education, clean water and sanitation. It will also be important to maintain the effort to clear Iraq of mines and unexploded ordnance, some of which go back to Saddam Hussein's war with Iran in the 1980s; and to make possible the orderly return of Iraqi refugees from neighbouring countries.

It will also be important to ensure as far as possible the full involvement of women

in political and economic affairs, to rebuild Iraqi civil society, to develop independent news media, and to create a favourable environment for Iraqi private sector development.

The Development Fund for Iraq will be the central means for financing Iraq's public services, as well as meeting the costs of reconstruction and development, during the process of political transformation. It will be essential that the Fund's priority setting and resource

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allocation processes work as transparently as possible for the clear benefit of the Iraqi people, as envisaged in UN Security Council Resolution 1483 of 22 May.

The United Nations is preparing an update of its Flash Appeal for Iraq. It will be discussed at an official level meeting in New York on 23 June, which will be followed by an informal meeting of donors. Any further DFID contribution towards emergency humanitarian assistance will be considered in view of the needs identified in the revised Appeal and the outcome of the discussions in New York. Consideration of the allocation of DFID funding for longer term reconstruction and development will be undertaken in light of the social and economic needs assessments currently being carried out by the World Bank, IMF and United Nations.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Tenancy Moneys

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. Tony McNulty): Last November we consulted on options for safeguarding tenancy moneys to address concerns that an appreciable number of tenants were losing out—and the image of the private rented sector as a whole was suffering.

The consultation paper followed two years of Government funding of a pilot tenancy deposit scheme. It reflected the evidence that a voluntary scheme was not an effective option. Take up of the pilot had been poor and so were the prospects of a self-financing voluntary national scheme. So, we sought views on the case for compulsory measures.

The consultation paper indicated that there is not a robust basis for legislating to compel the protection of tenancy moneys in third party schemes. It showed that with costs of £19 million per annum and benefits of £20 million per annum, the case for so legislating was finely balanced. I have to say that the responses to the consultation were equally inconclusive.

Nevertheless the Government are committed to addressing the case for legislation alongside consideration of proposals that the Law Commission plans to publish by

this autumn, particularly with regard to written tenancy agreements. That seems an appropriate context in which to address the safeguarding of tenancy money.

We have learnt some useful lessons from Government funding of the voluntary pilot tenancy deposit scheme—not least that there was no prospect of it becoming a self-financing voluntary scheme with a substantial membership. Therefore, so far as Government funding is concerned it will be have to be wound up. Nevertheless the Government would be more than happy to endorse self-financing voluntary schemes in advance of legislative proposals.

We will publish detailed proposals and a full response to the consultation later in the year, in the light of what the Law Commission publishes.

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HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum Claims

The Minister for Citizenship and Immigration (Beverley Hughes): On 20 March we suspended consideration of Iraqi asylum applications following the start of military action in Iraq. We have been keeping under review whether this suspension should be kept in place.

Large numbers of Iraqis have come to the UK to seek asylum in recent years. We have provided them with asylum or protection on other grounds when they have needed it. But the situation in Iraq has now changed.

While there remain security and humanitarian concerns in some areas, we believe there has been a real and sustained improvement in the country situation, and that political persecution is no longer prevalent. We will therefore now resume consideration of Iraqi asylum claims. As with asylum applications from all nationalities, each case will be considered individually on its merits.

This resumption coincides with the decision of the Chief Adjudicator that adjudicators should start listing Iraqi asylum appeals again as from 16 June. Such appeals have been suspended for the same period as initial decision making.

We are developing a coherent returns programme. Initially the emphasis will be on facilitating voluntary returns. This will cover failed asylum seekers and others who wish to return to Iraq, including those who applied for or received protection before the military action took place. We will start the enforced return of failed asylum seekers later in the year.

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We have in the past given undertakings not to enforce the return of individuals to

the Kurdish Autonomous Zone of northern Iraq via other parts of Iraq. That was because of the potential risks those individuals would face from the Saddam Hussein regime. Those undertakings are no longer necessary. Once enforced returns to Iraq are started they will be effected by the route deemed most appropriate.

LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

Convention on the Future of Europe

The Leader of the House (Peter Hain): The Convention on the Future of Europe has done a good job.

The outcome is a foundation for a modern, more democratic Europe, better anchored to its nation states and more accountable to its citizens. The Constitutional treaty will be simpler and clearer for everyone. It will help us run a more efficient, effective Union after 10 more countries join next year. It should provide legal certainty and stability for a period of many years. And it establishes for the first time a long-term Chair of the European Council, to make sure that the Union's strategy reflects the views of national Governments. This was Britain's priority reform and we have secured it.

Over the past few weeks, I have tabled a number of amendments. Some of them raise serious policy issues—for example on foreign policy and defence, and criminal law. Others are to help achieve clarity in what will become a legally binding document. This unfinished business will be negotiated by member states in the Intergovernmental Conference that will now follow. But I believe the wide agreement we have been able to reach here will provide a good basis for the remainder of the Union's work here over the coming months.
