

House of Commons
International Development
Committee

**PREPARING FOR THE
HUMANITARIAN
CONSEQUENCES OF
POSSIBLE MILITARY
ACTION AGAINST IRAQ:
GOVERNMENT
RESPONSE to the
Committee's Fourth Report
of Session 2002-03**

Second Special Report of Session
2002–03

HC 561
[incorporating HC 560]

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INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

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SECOND SPECIAL REPORT

**The International Development Committee has agreed to the following
Special Report:**

**PREPARING FOR THE HUMANITARIAN CONSEQUENCES OF POSSIBLE
MILITARY ACTION AGAINST IRAQ: GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE
COMMITTEE'S FOURTH REPORT OF SESSION 2002–03**

The International Development Committee reported to the House on preparing for the Humanitarian Consequences of Possible Military Action against Iraq in its Fourth Report of Session 2002–03, published on 12 March 2003 as HC 444. The Government Response to that Report was received on 21 March 2003 in the form of a memorandum to the Committee. It was placed in the House of Commons Library and on the Committee's website on 21 March. It is reproduced as an Appendix to this Special Report along with its Annex, Written Ministerial Statement by the Secretary of State for International Development to the House of Commons, 13 March 2003.

APPENDIX

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE COMMITTEE'S REPORT ON PREPARING FOR THE HUMANITARIAN CONSEQUENCES OF POSSIBLE MILITARY ACTION AGAINST IRAQ

MEMORANDUM FROM THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Introduction

1. The Government welcomes the International Development Committee's report on humanitarian contingency planning for Iraq. We welcome in particular how quickly the Committee was able to carry out its inquiry and publish its report. The report has played a valuable role helping to raise awareness of the humanitarian risks facing the Iraqi people, and reminding the international community of its responsibilities.
2. Since the Committee's report was published, military action has started. Government priorities include ensuring that the military campaign is as swift and carefully targeted as possible, and working with the UN and international community to help meet the humanitarian needs of the Iraqi people and start to reconstruct the country as quickly as possible. In doing so we will apply the lessons learned in previous crises.
3. A detailed response to the committee's conclusions and recommendations is set out below.

Recommendation A. "We recommend that DFID immediately issues a statement outlining its basic humanitarian contingency plans. This would be a useful source of information for humanitarian actors and would also provide reassurance that adequate importance has been attached to the humanitarian consequences of military action (paragraph 8)."

4. The Secretary of State for International Development issued a written statement to the House of Commons on 13 March. This is attached at Annex 1.

Recommendation B. "Notwithstanding the difference of opinion between UN and NGOs, and understanding the need for confidentiality, we urge DFID and the UN, where possible, as a principle to provide confidential briefings to NGOs to facilitate effective planning (paragraph 10)."

and

Recommendation C. "There is a pressing need for a mechanism for coordinating the UK humanitarian response so that UK NGOs can be connected with the UN, the military and local NGOs to facilitate information sharing between all relevant actors (paragraph 11)."

5. DFID has regular discussions and meetings with UK-based NGOs involved in humanitarian support for Iraq, both in London and in the region. Meetings also involve NGOs that are considering possible humanitarian interventions.
6. The Government considers coordination and the sharing of information amongst all humanitarian agencies and donors essential to effective humanitarian response. The UN has the lead role and their mechanisms for doing so are well established. It is important that UK NGOs are fully involved in such international coordination, rather than in UK-

specific arrangements. DFID is supporting UN OCHA in the establishment of its Humanitarian Information Centre (based in Larnaca), to help facilitate effective coordination for Iraq, and has provided an information management specialist to the Centre.

Recommendation D. “It is clear is that the scale of funds needed will be massive, given the dependency of the majority of the Iraqi population on the OFF programme which delivers \$5 billion worth of commodities into the country in each six month phase, the food element of which costs \$250 million a month to maintain. (paragraph 12).”

and

Recommendation E. “If delivery of food through the UN Oil For Food Programme (OFF) does breakdown it will affect the 60% of Iraqis to whom the programme currently delivers, two-thirds of whom have no other source of food. Even in northern Iraq, where the WFP have trebled the ration to allow stockpiling, a food crisis would spread to northern Iraq within three months and would be severely worsened by a likely influx of internally displaced persons. Humanitarian contingency planning must take account of the serious risk that at least 40% of the population will be without any source of food in the absence of OFF rations. (paragraph 14).”

7. We agree that it is essential to ensure that the Oil for Food Programme is re established as soon as possible. DFID has been fully engaged for many months in trying to get the international community to face the humanitarian risks of military action in Iraq, and to make preparations. Many international agencies have been making contingency plans but did not wish to be seen to be doing so because many of the countries to which they were accountable were strongly hostile to the prospects of military action. There has been close collaboration between DFID and the Ministry of Defence to minimise the humanitarian impact of any conflict. One of our aims has been to minimise damage to the infrastructure on which the OFF distribution network depends, in order that it can be re-established as quickly as possible after any conflict.

8. DFID has already set aside £90m which will take up most of the DFID contingency reserve to help provide for immediate humanitarian relief. This includes £20m committed to UN agencies and NGOs for their contingency planning and the prepositioning of food and other supplies. The Government has made clear the importance it attaches to humanitarian relief for the Iraqi people and the reconstruction of the country after conflict. Further discussions about the resources needed to meet these commitments are proceeding urgently.

Recommendation F. “A new Resolution on OFF is needed to allow the UN Secretary General to take executive control as soon as hostilities begin (paragraph 16).”

9. The Government agrees. We are working towards a new resolution on these lines with the UN Secretariat and other Security Council members. The resolution would authorise the UN Secretary General and his designated representatives to provide humanitarian assistance throughout Iraq using the resources available under the OFF Programme. We expect a draft resolution to be tabled shortly.

Recommendation G. “It is to be noted that the current mandate for OFF ends on June 3rd 2003 (paragraph 16).”

10. The Government is aware of this.

Recommendation H. “As we have already commented, there may be problems with the delivery of existing Government of Iraq contracts. Detailed planning around how

a replacement supply of food to OFF can be provided is necessary as is consideration of how such a supply can be channeled through existing delivery mechanisms. Consideration has also to be given to alternative food distribution options, given the risk that local delivery outlets may not be operational (paragraph 20)."

11. Humanitarian agencies have been making contingency plans for bringing in food to Iraq while the OFF may be disrupted. These include prepositioning of supplies, pre-booking of trucks for transportation, and agreements established with neighbouring countries on access routes. The World Food Programme (WFP) is the lead agency and is being supported with DFID funding. WFP's current appeal for preparedness funding is almost fully met.

12. The UK military is drawing up plans to provide immediate humanitarian relief in line with its obligations under the Geneva and Hague Conventions until the UN and other specialist agencies are able to do so, supported with advice from DFID humanitarian specialists. We will promote the use of existing distribution and delivery mechanisms wherever possible.

Recommendation I. "Planning for sites for IDP and refugee camps must include planning for the provision of water, sanitation, and health care. Food and non-food items such as tents should be pre-positioned at camp sites. Camp planning must also take careful consideration of the risk of injury from unexploded ordnance and landmines. (paragraph 23)."

13. The Government agrees. The UN have been working with Iraq's neighbouring countries on planning for possible refugee influxes. Preparations have been made on the basis of the UN's contingency planning estimates of possible population movements which cover a wide range of possibilities. Relevant UN agencies have expertise in all the areas identified by the Committee and have prepared accordingly. DFID has provided £1.75m to UNHCR for their preparations to support refugees. UN agencies have agreed that the International Organisation for Migration will take a lead on internally displaced people; the International Committee for the Red Cross will also play a major role. DFID has provided £8m to WFP, £2m to UNICEF, £1.5m to ICRC, £1m to WHO and £250,000 to IOM for their preparations, including for support to internally displaced people.

Recommendation J. "Military planning should seek to minimise humanitarian consequences. However, it is inevitable that there will be damage to Iraq's infrastructure. It is therefore essential that sufficient medical supplies are available to deal with any outbreak in disease. Vaccination programmes should be carried out now to minimise casualties. Provision must also be made to address the potential lack of clean drinking water and sanitation services (paragraph 25)."

14. The Government shares the Committee's concerns. The UK military is clear that every attempt must be made to minimise humanitarian consequences. The importance of infrastructure—especially for water and sanitation—has been fully recognised by the military and plans have been developed to provide, where necessary, emergency water and electricity supply.

15. DFID and other donors are supporting the work of WHO, ICRC and NGOs to position medical stocks in the region for use in areas of greatest need. A vaccination programme has recently been undertaken by the UN. As priorities and access dictate, the UN will continue to conduct such programmes for refugees, IDPs and the civilian population. WHO assesses that a combination of UN agencies, NGOs and the ICRC have medical supplies to meet the emergency needs of half a million refugees or other people acutely affected by conflict for three months in Iraq, and for 150,000 in surrounding countries. Supplies for three months

for another 750,000 people are also on call in the region. Inevitably, risks remain, including deliberate actions that may be taken by the Iraqi regime to create humanitarian problems.

Recommendation K. “In preparing to prevent the outbreak of ethnic conflict in Iraq the UK Government should remember the experience of Afghanistan where an initial “my enemy’s enemy is my friend” approach led the US to support regional power holders, thereby fuelling warlords and creating barriers to security and stability. The best case scenario for military action would involve Iraqi surrender with central authority structures remaining intact. However, it is essential that in planning for the possible humanitarian consequences of military action the worst case scenario, involving ethnic conflict, is considered. Safe havens could be a useful mechanism for preventing ethnic conflict but it essential that there is clear identification of who will be safe inside havens and how they will be protected. (paragraph 28).”

16. The risk of ethnic violence following conflict is a serious concern. Military and humanitarian planning is informed by this risk. The establishment of safe havens may not necessarily be the best approach. The objective will be to create a secure and safe environment for all Iraqis so that people do not want to move. This will require a focus on quick stabilisation of areas coming under coalition military control, especially where the risk of ethnic conflict is highest.

Recommendation L. “Ideally, international and Iraqi health workers would be trained in how to deal with the human impact of chemical or biological weapons and would receive the same immunisations against biological weapons that are offered to military personnel. The UN has discarded the option of providing protective suits for its staff because they will be impractical. In any case UN staff would be withdrawn at the outset of any chemical or biological attack. Specialist clothing and equipment are prohibitively expensive, putting them beyond the reach of most agencies. Every effort must be made to ensure that information on the supply of protective clothing is provided. Giving information on weapons capability is an extremely difficult area for the military but it is one where there needs to be serious cooperation between the military and UN agencies and NGOs (paragraph 29).”

17. The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) provide advice and training to the humanitarian community on chemical and biological weapons use and protection. The coalition military will provide security information (including on the disposition of munitions and, if appropriate, areas of contamination) to the humanitarian community through the Humanitarian Operations Centre based in Kuwait. This will assist humanitarian organisations to determine the permissiveness of the environment in which they wish to operate. The Government does not believe that most NGOs are adequately trained, prepared or equipped to play a significant role in responding to a chemical or biological weapons attack.

Recommendation M. “Even without a further UN Security Council Resolution authorising military action, the UN will still be able to operate in Iraq under its humanitarian mandate (paragraph 30).”

18. The Government agrees. It is the Government’s policy to support the work of international humanitarian agencies, particularly those of the United Nations, to take the leading role in responding to humanitarian emergencies, regardless of the legal or political circumstances.

Recommendation N. “It is important that the UN should have the lead role in a post-conflict Iraq as soon as possible. There is a real danger that donors and NGOs would not play a full part in the post-conflict reconstruction of Iraq if the country were administered by a military governor (paragraph 31).”

Recommendation R. “This underlines the case for having a lead role for the UN planned for the aftermath of hostilities. (paragraph 36).”

19. The Government agrees. A UN mandate will be required to provide legal authority for the reconstruction effort, and to make possible the engagement of the International Financial Institutions and the wider international community. The Government is at the forefront of efforts to ensure that a suitable UN mandate is put in place and is holding regular discussions with key partners to achieve this. The Secretary of State for International Development visited New York and Washington on 19–20 March to take forward these issues with UN, IFI and US officials.

Recommendation O. “A second Security Council Resolution has been proposed but it is designed mainly to reinforce Resolution 1441. The draft makes no provision for humanitarian relief. We believe that the Resolution should take account of the likely humanitarian consequences of military action. Subsequent to any armed conflict, a further Resolution will be needed to make provision for changes to the OFF programme to allow for its continuation during and after a conflict. It should also set down what the UN’s role will be after a conflict. In Afghanistan we saw the importance of the role played, in the early days, by the UN Special Representative in balancing different interests and championing and safeguarding the rights of civilians before, during and after military action. Iraq will also benefit from a Special UN Representative. We believe that an appointment should be made immediately, regardless of the plans of the US military for the post-conflict stage (paragraph 32).”

20. The first part of this recommendation has been superseded by events. The Government agrees that further UN Security Council Resolutions are needed to amend OFF and to establish post-conflict arrangements with a strong role for the UN. We are working hard on these. (See responses to recommendations F. and N.) The UN already has a Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq, Mr Romero Lopes de Silva. Discussions about the UN’s role in Iraq after conflict include consideration of how the UN’s work would be coordinated.

Recommendation P. “We believe that one area in which the military could play an important role is policing and protection. We urge the military to develop plans to provide such protection, where requested, for humanitarian work if they have not already done so. There have been reports of a plan which will include the deployment of UN peace keeping forces, or monitors. We endorse this proposal. (paragraph 35).”

21. The need for the maintenance of law and order has been fully appreciated and incorporated into campaign planning. The military is however unable to provide an absolute guarantee of protection to the humanitarian community. Specific requests for protection from the UN on behalf of the humanitarian community will be dealt with on a case by case basis and within military capability. We have not heard of any credible plans for the deployment of UN peacekeeping forces or monitors and believe that any such deployment is unlikely.

Recommendation Q. “Military/humanitarian cooperation is an extremely difficult area. But the difficulties have to be resolved now before any fighting begins (paragraph 36).”

22. The Government agrees that military/humanitarian dialogue is essential, although we acknowledge the sensitivities involved on both sides and the respect that has to be accorded to military and humanitarian mandates. The coalition military has set up a mechanism for dialogue by establishing, with the Government of Kuwait, a Humanitarian Operations Centre (HOC) in Kuwait City to act as a focal point for information exchange with the humanitarian community. For those organisations not present in Kuwait, or unwilling to

work through the HOC, information exchange should be possible through the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) which has a presence in Kuwait and the region.

23. The Humanitarian Operations Centre is facilitating visa entry and customs clearance for NGOs into Kuwait and plans to provide security information to the humanitarian community to enable them to assess whether conditions allow their access into the country. We support this dialogue and information provision, which we hope will help the humanitarian community to take over from the military in the provision of assistance to those in need as soon as the situation allows. We recognise and will uphold the importance of independent humanitarian action.

Recommendation S. “Based on the evidence we heard, the scale of the humanitarian need may well exceed the capacity of the international system. (paragraph 37).”

24. The potential scale of need in Iraq is enormous. 19 million people are currently dependent on Oil For Food handouts, and many are dependent on electrically-pumped water and sanitation systems. Even with more time, no preparation would be enough to cope with the scale of the worst-case scenarios, including the possible use of chemical and biological weapons on the civilian population. That is why it is so important to minimise those risks. The Government is committed to doing so.

Recommendation T. “Despite pledges being made to a UN emergency fund at a conference in Geneva on 15–16 February, the indication is that the scale of humanitarian need will drastically outweigh the funds available and that there is a severe lack of funds available immediately for planning and preparation. (paragraph 38).”

25. The Geneva meeting, held on 15–16 February, was not a donor pledging conference but an information-sharing meeting, hosted by the Swiss Government. The initial UN appeal in January for contingency planning requirements sought \$38m. The level of requirements was later revised and a subsequent UN appeal for \$123m was announced on 18 February. At 20 March, donors have committed \$94 to UN preparedness measures.

26. To date, DFID has committed £13m to the UN contingency preparedness appeal (16% of the total requested). We are considering a further contribution and will make an announcement shortly. We understand that the UN plans to launch a separate Flash Appeal for around US\$1.9bn in the event of conflict. We will consider and respond to this swiftly and generously, as needs dictate.

Recommendation U. “We are concerned that the international system lacks the financial and resource ability to cope with multiple crises around the world and echo the statement made by CARE International that: “We are, as the Secretary of State’s written evidence pointed out, very, very worried about the loss of publicity of very serious humanitarian disasters which are in place at the moment in Southern Africa, in East Africa and we now have West Africa with the disruption in Côte d’Ivoire”. (paragraph 39).”

27. The Government shares this concern. The humanitarian community is overstretched with so many crises around the world, including in Afghanistan, the West Bank/Gaza, southern Africa, Ethiopia and Eritrea. It is critical that these crises are not overlooked and DFID has made clear it will not divert resources from other crises to provide support for Iraq.

Recommendation V. “We call on the UN to clarify with Iraq’s neighbours their attitude to accepting refugees in the event of armed conflict, whether or not they have signed the refugee convention. (paragraph 40).”

28. The UN has discussed with all Iraq’s neighbours their willingness and ability to assist refugees crossing national borders in the event of conflict. Iraq’s neighbours are mostly cooperating fully with humanitarian agencies in preparing for the possibility of refugees. It is critical that all Iraq’s neighbours fulfil their legal and moral obligations in the event of large population movements.

Recommendation W. “Although Clare Short told us that humanitarian considerations must be paramount, there are still concerns that this will not be the case. Christian Aid’s Roger Riddell said: “I am worried about a line of questioning which suggests we do the war and then worry about the humanitarian consequences afterwards. The Geneva Conventions require that those who engage in military activity focus on civilians right from the start”. Clare Short told the House that the: “simplistic view that we should get on with the war, after which my Department and a few people can clean up, is ill-informed. I and my Department have been fully engaged in trying to get the world to face the humanitarian risks and make preparations”. The Prime Minister told the House that there needs to be: “a humanitarian plan that is every bit as viable and well worked out as a military plan”. We fully concur, but have yet to be convinced that this is the case (paragraph 41).”

29. The Government is strongly committed to ensuring that we urgently relieve the suffering of the Iraqi people. In our view, the overall level of preparedness of the international community to cope with the humanitarian challenges which may lie ahead in Iraq is not as great as it could be. We will continue to play a leading role in encouraging and supporting a comprehensive international response to the needs of the Iraqi people by those agencies best placed to do so. We will focus, in particular, on efforts to ensure that the UN is both funded and enabled, through Security Council resolutions, to play a leading role. And we will use our own human and financial resources, through DFID and—when appropriate—the UK military, to ensure the direct delivery of humanitarian assistance, retaining flexibility to deploy these resources where they are most needed.

*Secretary of State for International Development
21st March 2003*

ANNEX

Written Ministerial Statement by the Secretary of State for International Development to House of Commons: HUMANITARIAN CONTINGENCY PLANNING FOR IRAQ

I welcome the International Development Committee's report on humanitarian contingency planning in Iraq. The House may welcome a summary of the principles my Department has applied in our planning, our current level of preparedness and constraints on it, and our assessment of the international community's planning. I set out my position in a written memorandum to the Committee before I gave evidence on 12 February. We will respond in due course to the report's detailed recommendations, some of which have already been addressed or are already Government policy. I want to set out to the House now how our planning has developed in the last month.

The Government's objectives on Iraq were set out to the House in a written statement by Jack Straw on 7 January. These include as an immediate priority to continue to support humanitarian efforts to relieve the suffering of the Iraqi people. We have worked to encourage contingency planning for a range of scenarios, including the possible resolution of the crisis without conflict. My responsibilities as Secretary of State for International Development include helping minimise the risk of humanitarian suffering as well as alleviating it when it occurs, and this has guided our planning. We have had extensive discussions across Government about how military strategy can minimise and mitigate the risks of conflict to the Iraqi people.

In the event of conflict in Iraq, my Department would have two humanitarian roles. One is to help advise the Ministry of Defence and the armed forces on how best to discharge their humanitarian responsibilities under the Hague and Geneva Conventions. The other is to use the funds, expertise and influence available to us to support the direct delivery of impartial humanitarian assistance by the international humanitarian community. I will summarise what we are doing in both capacities.

In the event of conflict and the occupation of Iraqi territory by the UK military, the occupying forces would have humanitarian responsibilities under the Hague and Geneva Conventions. It is likely that in the first stages of any conflict, UN agencies and NGOs would not be fully operational, particularly if there is a credible threat of the use of chemical or biological weapons. Military forces thus might have primary responsibility for the initial delivery of humanitarian assistance. They are also likely to play a key role over a longer time period in providing a secure environment for other organisations to deliver humanitarian assistance. My Department has been advising the Ministry of Defence and the armed forces on these issues for some time. We have recently agreed the secondment of a full-time Civil-Military Humanitarian Adviser to the Headquarters UK 1 Division in Kuwait, and are also providing advice to the National Component Headquarters in Qatar. We are considering additional support. We are discussing with the armed forces the use of military Quick Impact Projects in the period immediately after any conflict, which DFID would consider funding where there are clear humanitarian needs.

The principles we apply in delivering humanitarian assistance to Iraq are the same as anywhere else. They are not determined by the nature of the conflict, or subject to military strategy or diplomatic considerations. We will respect international humanitarian law and relevant human rights laws and conventions. We will allocate our assistance impartially based on the best possible assessment of need. We will state clearly the standards we aspire to and how we are accountable for our assistance. We will respect the neutrality and independence of our humanitarian partners. Where moral dilemmas in the delivery of humanitarian assistance arise, often requiring fast and difficult decisions, with lives at stake, we will be explicit in the analysis which guides our choices, and communicate this openly.

It is the Government's policy to support the work of international humanitarian agencies, particularly those of the United Nations, to take the leading role in responding to humanitarian emergencies. My Department's regular funding to the UN and other humanitarian agencies includes provision for emergency preparedness for a variety of contingencies across the world. On 10 February I announced I was supplementing this funding with an additional £3.5m contribution to support UN humanitarian contingency planning for Iraq. This money has been allocated to a range of UN agencies including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Programme, the World Health Organisation, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the United Nations Security Coordinator (UNSECOORD). I decided last week to provide a further £6.5m to supplement our existing funding for the Iraq planning work of these agencies, and support a small number of NGOs in their contingency preparedness. For UN agencies to maintain a high level of preparedness for a range of scenarios is prudent, but this has continuing recurrent costs. We are keeping this situation under regular review and maintain close contact with UN agencies and other donors about how far UN appeals have been met.

This £10m of new funding is in addition to the UK's ongoing humanitarian programme in Iraq. Since 1991 DFID has provided over £100m of bilateral assistance, and DFID's contributions through the EC have been an additional £15m. In 2002-3 we expect to spend over £8m. Much of this supports the work of NGOs operating in Northern Iraq. Humanitarian work in the North, where the Oil For Food programme is run by the UN and the Kurdish authorities are keen to collaborate with a range of international organisations, is much easier than in the Centre/South. Despite sanctions, humanitarian indicators such as maternal mortality and child mortality have improved much faster in the North under the Oil For Food programme. But my Department is also funding the work of UNICEF, the International Committee of the Red Cross and CARE in Baghdad-controlled Iraq. These organisations do essential technical work improving water and sanitation systems, repairing health facilities, and building the capacity of the Iraqi people to maintain their own infrastructure.

My Department is now holding weekly confidential meetings with NGOs to share information on our and their contingency planning, and discuss areas of mutual cooperation such as preserving humanitarian independence. We are making contingency preparedness funding available to those who have carefully thought through the complexities of the humanitarian environment and are likely to be able to play a significant role in the early stages after any conflict.

DFID believes that the UN, through the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs should play the leading role in the coordination of humanitarian activity, including in the vital function of the pooling and sharing of information about priority needs. The UN is best able to reassure implementing agencies of the independence of humanitarian decision-making. My Department is funding OCHA to prepare for this role in Iraq, including through support for the creation of a Humanitarian Information Centre headquartered in Larnaca, to which we will be seconding a specialist. We are also supporting the UN Joint Logistic Centre through further secondments.

DFID's strategy for responding to the humanitarian needs following any conflict will be determined by events which cannot be predicted. Retaining sufficient flexibility at this stage to deploy our finite financial and human resources where they are most needed is essential. We are deploying operational humanitarian staff to key locations in the region now so we can take rapid and well-informed decisions when required about future deployment.

We have brought DFID's stockpile of non-food items, vehicles and equipment to immediate readiness, and are procuring additional supplies. We are positioning some of these stocks

in Kuwait and elsewhere in the region, where they could be used by a variety of implementing partners. This is in addition to the prepositioning done by UN agencies and others which we are helping to fund.

DFID is working closely with the Ministry of Defence, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Treasury to assess the possible costs of humanitarian assistance in the event of conflict. The unmet needs could be enormous. The precise cost will depend on the extent of damage and displacement caused by any conflict, and particularly on disruption to the Oil For Food programme (OFF). We have put considerable effort into discussing how to minimise that disruption. Contingency planning includes looking at how disruption to the delivery of essential services provided by OFF can be minimised. The Government expects a leading role for the UN in such circumstances. We are working with others on detailed ideas for a possible further UN Security Council Resolution to ensure OFF could continue to operate in a modified form after any conflict.

As well as close liaison with UN agencies whose contingency planning we are already contributing to, my Department has maintained dialogue with a range of other governments. The Office for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Affairs in the US Department of Defense is now leading American planning on humanitarian issues which would arise after any conflict. DFID has a secondee in ORHA; the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defence have also seconded staff. My officials are in close contact with their US counterparts on a range of humanitarian issues. The Government is aware of the plans of a large number of other countries and international organisations who would contribute to immediate humanitarian assistance in Iraq in the event of conflict. Most would do so according to humanitarian principles regardless of who the belligerents were and on what basis conflict started. Coordination of planning is politically sensitive for many of them at this stage. The UK will encourage wider international coordination as quickly as these political sensitivities allow.

My assessment of the overall level of preparedness of the international community to cope with the humanitarian challenges which may lie ahead in Iraq is that it is limited, and this involves serious risk. UN agencies have made sensible plans with the resources at their disposal. The USA has put a lot of effort into its planning but lacks recent on the ground experience of work in Iraq, and I am concerned by optimistic assumptions about how quickly the UN and NGOs might be able to do post-conflict work. The UK military's humanitarian planning has been proceeding quickly in recent weeks but their Geneva Convention obligations could be huge.

Many donors have not engaged fully with the detail or the scale of the potential humanitarian challenges. There are currently serious humanitarian crises in Afghanistan, the West Bank/Gaza, southern Africa, Ethiopia and Eritrea, and both the international humanitarian system and DFID resources are highly stretched. We could do more with a little more time. But ultimately no preparation would be enough to cope with the scale of the worst-case scenarios - 16 million people currently dependent on Oil For Food handouts deprived of their monthly ration for a sustained period, the complete collapse of water and sanitation systems in a largely urban country of 25 million people, and the possible use of chemical and biological weapons on the civilian population. That is why it is so important to minimise those risks.

My Department is also considering the longer term reconstruction and reform issues. It is clear that a UN mandate will be required to provide legal authority for the reconstruction effort, and to make possible the engagement of the International Financial Institutions and the wider international community. Efforts are being made to ensure that a suitable mandate is put in place.

13th March 2003