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MINISTRY OF DEFENCE
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MO 6/17/15/1J

36 December 1990

Dear Charles,

Thanks
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The Minister
CD
2/1

CONTAINING IRAQI CW/BW CAPABILITY

At their discussions in Washington on 11th December US and UK officials agreed to look further at the implications of attacking Iraqi chemical and biological facilities in the light of our assessment that serious environmental damage might be caused. The US team undertook to study our assessment and further work on analysis and target selection was to be undertaken in theatre between US and UK military staffs.

These military discussions have not yet been completed. But the Defence Secretary has noted that President Bush told the Prime Minister that he was confident of limiting wider environmental damage by a 'one-two' punch in which initial high explosive attack would be followed by dropping incendiaries which would destroy most of the toxic substances. At Mr King's request, MOD experts have made an assessment of the likely success of this method of attack, with results that are not entirely reassuring.

In the case of chemical storage sites, mustard and nerve agents are flammable, so that an incendiary device would indeed reduce the downwind spread of freed agent. Biological weapon agent on the other hand is liquid slurry and not flammable, being able to withstand temperatures up to 900 C: an incendiary bomb would be likely to distribute the agents rather than limit its spread.

Further analysis is being undertaken, but on the face of it there remains a difference of technical view between us and the Americans on this issue. The current discussions in theatre may throw further light on it.

The next round of official discussions in Washington on 7th January will provide an opportunity to seek to resolve these ambiguities.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Richard Gozney (FCO) and Sir Robin Butler.

Yours sincerely,
John Webb

(S WEBB)
Private Secretary

Sir Charles Powell KCMG
10 Downing Street