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MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

MAIN BUILDING WHITEHALL LONDON SW1A 2HB

Telephone 071-21 82111/3

MO 14/4S

February 1991

Dear Christopher,

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VISIT BY FRENCH DEFENCE MINISTER

M Joxe paid a initial visit to the Defence Secretary today. This was curtailed to an hour by a summons to return to Paris to discuss a US request for overflying rights for B52s and basing of supporting tankers.

M Joxe arrived after visiting a French Airforce Jaguar base this morning where he made positive remarks to the press about co-operation between Britain and French airforces (our Defence Attache was in his party). During a photo call on arrival M Joxe spoke warmly about Anglo-French relations and common interests in the Gulf - dodging questions about what French diplomatists were doing in Iran.

During a tete-a-tete with the Defence Secretary, which occupied most of the available time, discussion centred on the Gulf. Mr Joxe, though obviously new to military affairs, showed a distinctly more supportive outlook than his predecessor.

The Defence Secretary said that the recent engagement in Khafji had been a useful introduction for the Saudis and Qataris. It looked as though the Allies had had much the best of the engagement with casualties of 20 compared to 350/400 Iraqi casualties or prisoners taken. The problem was getting the press to take a sensible view of Saddam Hussein's claims that this was some great victory for Iraq.

M Joxe referred in positive terms to the air campaign and the involvement of Jaguars. He found it difficult to discern how far the Allies were making an impact on Iraqi ground forces. The Defence Secretary commented that imagery of battle damage had been hard to get during recent periods of bad weather, but the air campaign did seem to be having a steadily mounting effect on Iraqi capability. There had been some spectacular successes (which prompted M Joxe to recall that 2,000 tons of munitions exploded in one recent raid). Nonetheless, the Iraqis probably still had over

Christopher Prentice Esq
Foreign and Commonwealth Office

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90% of ammunition and other logistic depots for their ground forces intact and the air campaign would have to continue for some time.

M Joxe wondered whether it would be helpful or not for Saddam Hussein now to have returned to television. The Defence Secretary said that on the whole coverage had not been damaging. In particular, the precision of Allied bombing of Baghdad had been underscored by the press reporting (though this might have the side-effect of relieving pressure upon the civilian population).

In response to questions from M. Joxe, the Defence Secretary said that we were worried by CW attack by Iraq which might come on Scuds but more likely from artillery. We had vaccinated our forces against Anthrax and Plague but only had post-attack treatment available for Botulinum. There was a worry about whether such agents could be used by terrorists as well as normal forces.

At this point the conversation was interrupted by news of the early meeting of the French War Cabinet to discuss B52s. The Defence Secretary explained the UK had accepted the basing of 8 aircraft and 5 tankers. It would certainly shorten the mission time to targets in Iraq and Kuwait if the French could find their way to help.

The two Ministers agreed to meet again soon (M Joxe is visiting French forces in Saudi from 3rd to 5th February). The Defence Secretary said that although there had been difficulties from time to time in defence relations between France and Britain, interests were generally very close. M Joxe said, pointedly, that he had always thought that was the case. The Defence Secretary mentioned specifically the close relations between Sir Peter Levene and M. Sillard on equipment.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Sir Charles Powell (No 10), and Sonia Phippard (Cabinet Office).

Yours sincerely
John Leveson

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