

Far East Prisoners of War and Civilian Internees

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Tom Watson):

Late last year, it emerged that inconsistent criteria had been used for deciding payments over the history of the ex-gratia payment scheme for former Far East prisoners of war and civilian internees. In response to this, my predecessor, the then Minister with responsibilities for veterans, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Mr. Touhig), agreed that there should be an independent investigation to examine how the use of inconsistent criteria had arisen and why this had not been exposed earlier. Mr. David Watkins, a retired senior civil servant from the Northern Ireland Office was appointed to undertake this work and his findings were presented to me on 7 July. A copy of his report has been placed in the Library of the House.

The report finds no evidence of culpable behaviour by individuals but identifies a number of shortcomings with the scheme's development and administration and also makes recommendations designed to avoid any recurrence.

I am grateful to Mr. Watkins for an investigation which has been thorough and far reaching, and has included consultation with the key representatives of those who were adversely affected by the errors. I welcome his report and can say now that we accept the overall thrust of its recommendations. We will analyse it in more detail, in consultation with other interested Departments, and I intend to give a more detailed response in a further statement after the recess.

While the errors in administering the scheme were deeply regrettable, I would echo the report's recognition of the admirable work undertaken by the then War Pensions Agency and others that allowed the scheme to be introduced in a remarkably short timescale, with some 14,000 payments made within three months of the scheme's introduction, and a total of over 25,000 payments now made.

Finally, I know that there has been a residual concern that a number of those who do not qualify under the scheme may be experiencing hardship. To respond to this concern, my officials have been in discussion with the charity which provides support in such cases amongst those from the UK who were once prisoners of war or civilian internees in the Far East. I am pleased to announce that the Ministry of Defence will shortly be providing financial assistance to support the charity's work in dealing with such cases and to help publicise the recently announced changes to the criteria, as a result of which eligibility under the scheme has been extended to those who can show a close link to the UK since the second world war.