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## Shocking suicide toll on combat veterans

By Nigel Morris and Kim Sengupta

### Tories demand better mental health care for troops returning from front

Britain faces a "ticking timebomb" of mental illness and suicide among young Army veterans who return from hand-to-hand combat in Afghanistan, the Conservatives will warn today.

A lack of mental health care for veterans, combined with the stress of fighting the Taliban, will mean many survivors of the conflict pay a heavy price in psychological problems and self harm, according to David Cameron and the shadow Defence Secretary Liam Fox.

As the bodies of eight soldiers – including three teenagers – killed in a bloody 24 hours in Helmand were repatriated yesterday, mental health experts joined the politicians in warning that not enough was being done to care for returning members of the armed forces.

Research suggests that veterans aged 18 to 23 are up to three times more likely to commit suicide than their civilian counterparts. Setting out plans today to boost mental health care for returning troops, Mr Fox and Mr Cameron will argue that more veterans of the Falklands campaign and the first Gulf War killed themselves after quitting the forces than died in action.

An estimated 264 Falklands veterans have committed suicide since the conflict ended, compared with 255 soldiers killed in action, according to an ex-servicemen's organisation.

Twenty-four British soldiers died during the 1991 Gulf War, but the Ministry of Defence disclosed last year that 169 veterans of the conflict had died from "intentional self-harm" or in circumstances that led to open verdicts at inquests.

Mr Fox told The Independent: "The suicide figures for past conflicts are deeply concerning. I worry that with the intensity of current operations in Afghanistan we are building up a timebomb of mental health problems."

David Hill, director of operations for the charity Combat Stress, said it took an average of 14 years for veterans to ask for help with post-traumatic stress disorder. Many suffered in silence – often harbouring suicidal thoughts – because they were reluctant to admit to their vulnerability.

Mr Hill said: "Servicemen and women are exposed to stresses that most people won't be exposed to in their lives. In Afghanistan, they are exposed to them quite early in their careers. There is a general lack of understanding about how intense these stresses can be."

A study by Manchester University this year found that ex-servicemen under 24 were between two and three times more likely to kill themselves than men of the same age from outside the forces.

Researchers suggested three possible reasons: that they were already more vulnerable to suicide before joining up; that they had trouble re-adapting to civilian life; or that they were affected by "exposure to adverse experiences".

Professor Nav Kapur, one of the report's authors, warned: "Young men leaving the armed forces appear to be at a higher risk. That needs to be recognised and action taken."

Kevan Jones, the Veterans minister, said: "We have made great progress both in the treatment of mental health problems and in reducing the stigma associated with seeking help. I'm working with the NHS to make sure GPs are telling veterans about the support available, such as the six community mental health schemes we have set up specifically tailored for veterans."

The Cabinet discussed the growing bloodshed in Afghanistan as the political controversy over the Government's tactics intensified. Fifteen UK soldiers were killed in a 10-day spell last week, bringing the number of deaths since 2001 to 184. Downing Street insisted yesterday that the Army was "making progress" in its attacks on Taliban positions in Helmand, but acknowledged British troops were facing a "critical period".

A spokesman for Gordon Brown said: "The clear view coming out of Cabinet was that we do have the right approach in Afghanistan." He denied Mr Brown had chosen the cheapest option for reinforcing the British forces by sending 700 extra troops rather than the 2,000 requested by military chiefs.

The head of the British Army disclosed yesterday that the military will review strategy in the light of the recent surge in deaths. General Sir Richard Dannatt said: "We have got to think through the way we operate, the resources we have got, the numbers... to make sure we have given ourselves the absolute best chance of succeeding."

Senior officers will analyse details from the latest combat in Helmand to ascertain what lessons can be learned. In particular they will examine how the Taliban are honing their use of roadside bombs and mines.

Stressing that withdrawal was not an option, General Dannatt said: "This mission is really important. If we were to pull out unilaterally, just come out of the mission... frankly, the consequences will be catastrophic."

Meanwhile 140 extra troops from the 2nd Battalion Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment, currently based in Cyprus, are being deployed to Afghanistan to assist with the offensive against the Taliban in Helmand, codenamed Operation Panther's Claw.

### **What are the other members of Nato doing to help us?**

**Q. Why have there been such levels of recrimination over British troop numbers in Afghanistan? What is the situation now?**

**A.** The UK deployment of about 4,000 troops to Afghanistan in 2006 took place against the background of a major commitment in Iraq. Commanders were concerned about "overstretch" and fighting on two fronts. Since then, the force in Afghanistan has reached 9,100 troops. When the UK began withdrawing from southern Iraq, the US wanted some forces diverted to Afghanistan. Senior British officers wanted 2,000 to 2,500 more troops sent to Helmand. A troop shortage meant ground won from the Taliban could not be held and it was felt that with up to 22,000 US troops heading to the country's south, including to Helmand, the British had to raise their numbers to maintain credibility. Gordon Brown opted for the lowest commitment option: a temporary deployment of 700 for the Afghan elections. The decision sparked controversy and will be reviewed after the autumn election. It is expected the 700 will become permanent and an additional force sent.

**Q. What has been the British strategy in Afghanistan since 2006?**

**A.** John Reid, the then defence secretary, said he hoped the mission would end "without a shot being fired in anger". Since then, about six million rounds are thought to have been fired. From the start of the mission, UK policy seemed confused and drifting. The official mission statement was that troops would help bring governance to a traditionally lawless part of the country and assist in poppy eradication. But they charged off to outlying areas and set up platoon houses, in effect inviting Taliban attacks. The operation ran counter to a plan by General (now Sir) David Richards, the British commander of Nato forces, which called for secure areas to be set up around larger towns, where reconstruction could begin. Instead, swaths of Helmand turned into battlefields, and there was little development.

**Q. Gordon Brown has asked for more Afghan government troops to be based in Helmand. Why? And how effective will this be?**

**A.** Nato's aim is for Afghans to provide their own security but it will be a while before they can. Mr Brown has said the Afghan forces should hold ground which British forces cannot, effectively acknowledging there are not enough British forces on the ground. About 11 per cent of the 85,000-strong Afghan army are in Helmand, which has seen almost half of recent fighting. But much of the Afghan force is still training. The plan is to expand the Afghan forces to 134,000. But even that number would seem unlikely to be able to meet a Taliban emergency which is recruiting international jihadists and is supported by elements in the Pakistani military and intelligence. Iraq, with a similar population, has about 600,000 in its force.

**Q. What about contributions from other Nato countries?**

**A.** No less than 42 countries contribute to the International Security Assistance Force. But many contingents, including some from Nato countries, operate under caveats which restrict what they are allowed to do, rendering them virtually ineffective in combat scenarios. The UK and US have demanded that other Western states should do more. The Canadians have the worst fatality rate, losing 126 personnel from a force of 2,800. The British have lost 185 out of 9,000 and the Americans, 723 from 60,000. The deadliest attack was on a French unit last August; 10 soldiers died in an engagement 40 miles from Kabul.

Kim Sengupta

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