

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

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UK: Deepcut and beyond - high time for a public inquiry

In advance of the publication by Nicholas Blake QC of the report of his review of the circumstances surrounding the deaths of Privates (Ptes) James Collinson, Geoff Gray, Cheryl James, and Sean Benton at the Royal Logistics Corps headquarters in Deepcut, Surrey, England, between 1995 and 2002, Amnesty International renews its call for a public inquiry.

Amnesty International noted that, on 10 March 2006, an inquest jury returned an open verdict at the conclusion of the inquest into the death of Pte James Collinson. The Surrey Coroner, Michael Burgess, said:

... my own personal view.... is that the MoD [the Ministry of Defence] should take whatever steps are necessary to restore public confidence in the recruitment and training of young soldiers whether at Deepcut or elsewhere. I personally believe that they should have nothing to fear from an inquiry held in public (if that is what is necessary) where the various issues outside the direct causation of the deaths of James and others) can be explored in greater depth....

Amnesty International once again calls on the UK government to immediately set up an independent and impartial judicial inquiry held in public to probe the serious allegations that have emerged. The inquiry should invite and seek out the views of the families of the deceased and the opinions of experts. It should meet in public and publish its findings and recommendations. The inquiry needs to address and make recommendations about the context in which the deaths have taken place so that further fatalities may be prevented in the future.

In addition, Amnesty International recommends that, as a matter of urgency, the UK authorities should:

- institute an effective, independent and impartial complaint mechanism with which complaints concerning serious allegations of bullying, sexual harassment and other ill-treatment can be lodged without fear of reprisal (e.g. a military ombudsperson); and
- ban, in all circumstances, the recruitment -- and deployment into hostilities at all times -- of people under the age of 18 years into the UK Armed Forces.

Background

In March 2002, 17-year-old James Collinson was found dead, with a single shot to the head, at the Royal Logistics Corps headquarters in Deepcut, Surrey, England. Army officials told his parents that he had committed suicide. Another 17-year-old, Geoff Gray, had also been found dead with two shots in the head at the same barracks in September 2001. An inquest into the circumstances of Geoff Gray's death, held in March 2002, returned an "open" verdict, with the coroner rejecting a suicide verdict.

In June 2002 it emerged that two further deaths had occurred in 1995 at Deepcut, that of Cheryl James,

18 years old, who had been found with a single bullet wound to the head, and for whom an inquest had recorded an "open" verdict; and that of 20-year-old Sean Benton who had been found dead with five gunshot wounds, for whom an inquest had recorded a verdict of suicide.

Over recent years, public concern has been mounting about deaths in disputed circumstances of army personnel, including under-18s, in non-combat situations in and around army barracks in the UK and at UK bases overseas. There have been allegations that some of these deaths may have involved unlawful killings, either intentional or as a result of negligence, through, for example, the misuse of lethal weapons; deaths during strenuous training exercises; and self-inflicted deaths, at times following bullying and ill-treatment, including sexual harassment, by other soldiers and superior officers.

In addition, questions have been raised about the adequacy and effectiveness of the authorities' response to these fatalities and the serious allegations that have arisen about them. Amnesty International has received reports that, in a number of cases, the UK authorities have failed to take adequate measures to ensure prompt, thorough, independent, impartial and effective investigations into these deaths, and to address the disputed circumstances in which they have been said to have taken place.

In November 2004 the UN Committee against Torture expressed concern about "reports of incidents of bullying followed by self-harm and suicide in the armed forces, and the need for full public inquiry into these incidents and adequate preventive measures". In December 2004, the Ministry of Defence appointed, Nicholas Blake QC, a senior barrister, to urgently review the circumstances surrounding the above-mentioned four deaths at Deepcut Barracks and to report.