

Most claims of British troops' abuse are 'baseless'

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RÉSUMÉ

Most of the criminal complaints, many dating back to 2003, were brought by a single law firm, Public Interest Lawyers, which has since shut down after it was banned from receiving legal aid over alleged irregularities over its work in Iraq.

TEXTE INTÉGRAL

ALMOST all the allegations of abuse made against British troops in Iraq are "baseless", the Attorney General admitted last night.

Jeremy Wright QC also conceded his own frustration at the time taken to investigate the claims.

The Iraq Historic Allegations Team (Ihat), which was set up by the Government, is investigating almost 1,500 complaints of mistreatment and unlawful killings made against British troops.

Most of the criminal complaints, many dating back to 2003, were brought by a single law firm, Public Interest Lawyers, which has since shut down after it was banned from receiving legal aid over alleged irregularities over its work in Iraq. The law firm and its founder, Phil Shiner, are being investigated by the Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal.

Mr Wright told a parliamentary inquiry yesterday that he believed that most of the claims against British troops were without foundation but resisted calls to wind up Ihat as a consequence.

As previously disclosed by The Telegraph, David Cameron, when prime minister, had tried to shut Ihat down but was told on legal advice by Mr Wright that it would not be possible.

Yesterday, the Attorney General, appearing before the parliamentary committee investigating Ihat's workings, refused to disclose his legal advice, saying to do so would break conventions.

But Mr Wright did reveal his own unease over Ihat. He told MPs: "There is a problem of volume here. The likelihood is a very, very small minority of these cases have any merit whatsoever.

"I am perfectly prepared to say I am convinced that at the end of this process the vast, vast majority of allegations will be found to be baseless." He added: "I do not dispute for a moment how difficult this process is and how frustrating it is that it is taking this long. It really should not."

The Ministry of Defence set up Ihat in 2010 in the wake of a series of adverse legal rulings and the threat of a formal investigation into war crimes by the International Criminal Court.

But critics say that Ihat simply encouraged thousands of spurious complaints - almost all made by one law firm, which received millions of pounds in legal aid. Mr Wright said the failure to "weed out quite quickly those cases that obviously don't have any merit" had encouraged "a very large number of non-meritorious cases". But he said Ihat was duty-bound to investigate all claims brought to its attention. He said: "We cannot assume everything he [Mr Shiner] brought to us is false."

Johnny Mercer, Conservative MP and chairman of the defence sub-committee, said Mr Wright's concession that the vast majority of claims were without foundation showed the urgent need to close Ihat and save hundreds of war veterans from the stress of criminal investigation.

Mr Mercer, a former Army captain, added: "I remain unconvinced of the need for Ihat."

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Credit: By Robert Mendick

DÉTAILS

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