

THE ARMY NEEDS MORE GURKHAS!



by
Lord
Ashcroft

DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY

THE British immigration system could hardly be described as a model of justice or consistency. And no recent case has exposed the current shambles, mismanagement and double-standards more graphically than the bizarre initial decision by the Home Office to refuse an elderly Gurkha war hero the right to live in this country.

Tul Bahadur Pun, now 84 years old, fought with immense gallantry for Britain during World War II, winning the Victoria Cross for an act of astonishing courage against the Japanese in Burma. During a battle in June 1944, having seen almost all his comrades in his section killed, he stormed an enemy gun position showing bravery that was 'most inspiring and beyond praise', according to his citation.

Yet when he recently applied for the right to live in Britain, partly because he wanted treatment for serious medical problems, he was refused an entry visa. To the Home Office bureaucrats, his heroic war record seemed to count for nothing.

Officials said that Tul Bahadur Pun had failed to demonstrate 'strong ties with the UK'. It is difficult to know what stronger demonstration of loyalty exists than the willingness to put one's life at risk in service of a country.

The decision seemed all the more absurd in the context of a national immigration system which had collapsed so badly that the Government was forced to admit that it 'doesn't have a clue' how many illegal migrants are living in this country.

Yet suddenly, amid this near anarchy, the Home Office thought that it should get tough with a highly decorated octogenarian, whose only crime was to have played a vital role in helping Britain to defeat tyranny more than 60 years ago.

Fortunately, the level of public outrage over the case ensured that the Home Office changed its mind. Tul Bahadur Pun has now been granted an entry visa, and I hope that his wife will also be given the right to settle here.

But this case has highlighted the need to treat all Gurkha veterans more justly. That means giving them not just

the right to remain here but also granting them British citizenship if they have served a certain length of time in our Army.

In explaining the U-turn on Mr Tul Bahadur Pun, the Home Office Minister Liam Byrne, said that the circumstances of his case were 'clearly exceptional' and of 'an extraordinary nature'. Mr Pun, however, is far from the only deserving case.

All long-serving Gurkha veterans should be treated in this way. To use the ministers' words, they are 'clearly exceptional' and their military service to our country has been 'of an extraordinary nature'.

The least we can do to honour such heroic service is give them the same rights that are now given to tens of thousands of migrants every year.

Since Labour came to power in 1997, almost one million foreigners settling here have been given British passports, usually after a stay of only five years.

MILITARY experience in the British Army should surely be just as strong a qualification for citizenship. A Gurkha who has served for five years should also have the right to a passport and leave to remain. In fact, the average Gurkha serves 16 years in the British forces, something that more than entitles them to special treatment.

What makes the Gurkhas' sacrifices on our behalf so astonishing is that their country of origin, Nepal, has never been politically connected to Britain.

The military association began in 1816, two years after the British had gone to war against Nepal to protect imperial territories in northern India. After several bloody campaigns, a peace treaty was signed in 1816.

The British had been so impressed by the ferocity of the Nepalese mountain tribesmen, known as Gurkhas, that after the peace deal, they encouraged the Gurkhas to volunteer for military service in the British East India Company. Thousands did so, partly because of good pay, partly because of the chance to display their fighting spirit.

Over the subsequent two centuries, the Gurkhas have won an enviable reputation for courage and prowess. At the Siege of Delhi in 1857, for instance, they showed the most remarkable selflessness in protecting British families. Out of 500 men on duty, 75 per cent were killed.

It was not until World War I that the Gurkhas were permitted to win the Victoria Cross, though since then they have won 13 in total. During World War I, more than 100,000 Gurkhas served with the British in France and the Middle East, and another 112,000 fought during World War II.

SINCE those two titanic conflicts, they have also been in Cyprus, the Falklands, Kosovo and Helmand Province in Afghanistan, winning universal respect for their self-discipline and fortitude.

About 3,500 Gurkha soldiers are in the Army today, with around 300 new recruits taken on every year. Among the physical tests they have to undertake are 75 bench jumps in one

minute and 70 sit-ups in two minutes.

The ten per cent of applicants who reach the final stage of the process have to undertake the Doko, which is a four-kilometre run up a steep track in less than 55 minutes, while carrying 75lb of rocks on their backs. It is no wonder that those who make it into service are so universally admired.

Indeed, given the problems that we have with military recruitment in this, I would like to see the number of Gurkhas in the British army raised from 3,500 to perhaps 10,000 or even 15,000. They have always been among our finest soldiers and their expansion can only raise standards.

Nor would it be difficult to take on more men without lowering standards, given that the average day's pay in Nepal is just £1 compared to £1,000 a month for British soldiers.

The Home Office blunder over Tul Bahadur Pun's case may have been due simply to incompetence rather than any ideological or political considerations.

Nevertheless, it is hard to understand what can have been going through the minds of civil servants when they turned it down. Tul Bahadur Pun deserved better than such ineptitude. And so do the rest of the Gurkha veterans.

■ Lord Ashcroft's book, *Victoria Cross Heroes*, is out now.