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## **THERESA MAY WILL OPPOSE 'VEXATIOUS' ALLEGATIONS AGAINST IRAQ UK TROOPS**

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Theresa May has vowed to oppose what she described as an industry of vexatious allegations against British troops during the Iraq war.

The prime minister told reporters in New York all allegations would be investigated but said steps had been taken to tackle abuse of the system.

More than 1,500 allegations of murder, abuse and torture by British troops are being handled by the government-established Iraq historic allegations team (Ihat), which May said would be completed by the end of 2019, after a review of the system by the former director of public prosecutions Sir David Calvert-Smith.

May told reporters travelling with her from the UN summit in New York: We should be absolutely proud of the fact that we have in our armed forces men and women who are willing to put themselves on the line for our safety and do things that most of us would not contemplate being willing to do in terms of our own safety. They put themselves on the line.

We can be proud also of the disciplined way in which our armed forces operate. But what is important is if there are allegations □ proper allegations □ of criminal activity, those need to be investigated.

But what we do need to make sure is that there isnt an industry of vexatious allegations coming forward. I think measures have been taken. The review of Ihat has said that they will be able to focus on cases where there may be questions of allegations which are not the vexatious ones and report within the timescale.

Nicholas Mercer, the former chief legal adviser for the British army during the Iraq war in 2003,

warned that the government could not dismiss the allegations lightly.

I hear the word vexatious and spurious bandied about but, to date, there have been 326 settled cases and the government has paid out £20m, he told Radio 4's Today programme. If the government paid out, these are not vexatious and not spurious. They are proven and the MoD [Ministry of Defence] have admitted liability.

Johnny Mercer, a former army officer and MP who has been an outspoken critic of the investigation, repeated his call for Ihat to be shut down immediately. Why are we applying human rights law to a battlefield which is inherently violent, that it was not designed to apply to? he told the BBC's Radio 4 Today programme. We are kind of emasculating our forces, as a country.

The Conservative MP has alleged that the former prime minister David Cameron told him he had taken legal advice on shutting down Ihat but was told by the attorney general, Jeremy Wright, it would be legally impossible to close down the investigations at that stage.

This is a national disgrace, we asked a generation of young people to conduct a deeply unpopular war, poorly resourced, poorly planned, the MP said. And when they return to the UK they are then pursued for decades afterwards by spurious allegations, what has become a self-inflicted industry, financed by the taxpayer which is yet to produce a single prosecution.

Nicholas Mercer said many of the cases could be settled because it was alleged that the Ministry of Defence had taught soldiers incorrect interrogation techniques that breached the Geneva convention.

He said: A soldier thinks he is following orders but later on he is prosecuted, so let the MoD come clean on what its interrogation technique was, whether it breached the Geneva and European conventions ... and then we could clear a whole load of cases in one stroke.

Johnny Mercer said troops at the very least needed a framework of support which is simply not there while they went through the investigation process.

People are feeling, like a whole generation do, that they don't really want to talk about their time in the army in Iraq, they feel let down, very betrayed, and these are good men and women who have given the best years of their lives to the service of this country, he said. I feel we have done them a huge disservice.

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