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1997 trust fund to be set up for ex-servicemen

By SIMON MACKLIN

A \$35 MILLION trust fund will be established by the Ministry of Defence to help local staff serving in the British Army and Royal Navy, many of whom are concerned for their future after the British withdrawal in 1997.

It is unclear whether the fund will be used to help the ex-servicemen emigrate, but awards will be made to those who set up home outside Hongkong.

The Commander of the British Forces, Major General Peter Duffell, announced the establishment of the fund last night at a dinner to raise cash for the trust.

General Duffell said the Chinese in the garrison had "understandable concerns" about their future.

"With this in mind, I have directed the creation of a charitable trust, with the aim that this will be established to relieve distress and hardship among former members of the Hongkong Military Service Corps and the Royal Navy."

It is intended the trust should be set up in the UK and administered by trustees based in Britain and operate for up to 50 years after 1997 totally independently of the future administration of the Special Administrative Region.

The fund would only be available to ex-servicemen of the 1,200-strong Hongkong Military Service Corps and the 300 local members of the Royal Navy.

These staff, who wear

British military uniforms, will be made redundant after the garrison withdraws.

A spokesman was unable to say if the money could be awarded directly to help ex-servicemen emigrate, but said the trust would certainly be used to help those who had established a new home outside Hongkong.

Members of the units work in support of the British garrison in different trades including dog handlers, drivers, cooks, clerks and medical assistants.

The Hongkong Military Service Corps was established to provide continuity in the operation of the garrison as British units are normally only based in the territory for a few years at a time.

A working group has been set up by the Ministry of Defence and the Security Branch of the Hongkong Government to help find employment for the 4,000 additional local civilians employed by the garrison who will also be made redundant.

General Duffell last night stressed the commitment of the garrison in support of Hongkong in the transition period.

"The garrison is firmly committed to Hongkong and I place great emphasis on the quality of our relationship with all aspects of Hongkong society."

The 8,700-strong garrison assists the Government in maintaining security and stability, the integrity of the land and sea borders and "sustains confidence" in Britain's commitment to Hongkong.