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25pc of children in Gurkhas 'disabled'

By VIRGINIA MAHER

MORE than 25 per cent of the children of members of the Brigade of Gurkhas suffer physical and mental handicaps because of marriages between close relatives and primitive medical facilities in Nepal, it has been revealed.

"We are often told when we ask that parents are first cousins, but you've got to remember lots of these children were born up in the hills where ante-natal care is nil," said consultant paediatrician, Dr Campbell Wilson.

But something is being done for the worst-affected children here, who are being cared for by two special units at Sek Kong.

The experts concentrate on teaching their parents how to make the most of the youngsters' training so they can pass the skills on to others when they return to Nepal.

Facilities in Nepal are almost non-existent for the severely handicapped and "frankly, many of these chil-

dren would have been left to die on a hillside, if they were in their own country", said Captain Caroline Airey of the Headquarters Brigade of Gurkhas.

There are 130 children with special needs in the Brigade of Gurkhas, which boasts a primary school of 273 pupils and a high school of 203.

Each of the seven children in the school unit is given 25 minutes of individual exercises and 1½ hours of specialised instruction to suit his or her own needs.

Regina, five, is strapped into a standing frame every day to exercise her match-stick thin arms and legs, which are encased in splints to prevent them bending at the joints and the muscles from shortening.

She is spastic, severely handicapped and no bigger than a toddler.

Her brother, Ashish, three, is in the pre-school unit which takes in just four children. He suffers from hydrocephalus, or fluid on

the brain, and is no bigger than a six-month-old.

The response from them is not apparent to visitors, but teacher Mr Ang Kaji Sherpa and his highly-trained helpers said their reactions to sound and touch were almost non-existent a few months ago. Among the children in the unit is Mr Sherpa's son Namgyal, eight, who is deaf.

The unit is small because an adult cannot cope with more than two children at a time and in the pre-school group it is one on one.

Much of the specialised equipment came from the United Kingdom.

The units are housed in two rooms in the primary school and in the play group's compound in the family quarters at Borneo Lines, Sek Kong.

The units opened their doors in September last year, with the help of charities like the Trailwalker Fund, expertise from the Matilda Hospital and individual donations.