

## After 32 years, it's time to act

If any former prisoners of war in Hongkong imagined that the long years of neglect they experienced at the hands of the Government were about to end following the spate of letters and pleas for a pension or free medical aid, they will realise they still have a long wait ahead of them.

No doubt there are problems in the way — one is where the Government draws the line in deciding who were active and therefore eligible combatants.

The Volunteers are the obvious starting point. But where do we go from there? What about ARP wardens and essential services personnel, certain civil servants who had to be out and about in all conditions, nurses and doctors? The list could be endless.

But the Government could cut short all this time-consuming speculation by finding out what other countries did.

Obviously there are going to be some aggrieved people on the fringe who feel that they were as much in the front line as any member of the armed forces and who therefore deserve the same privileges.

But it cannot hold back on deciding how to help the obviously eligible just because it cannot make up its mind about those who are less obviously eligible.

Nor, in our view, is it right for the Government to expect the Hongkong Ex-Prisoners of War Association to draw up a list of proposals to help its members. The initiative should come from the Government, however belatedly.

As it is more time, money and care are spent on the dead of the last war than those who survived. Whether this is Government or War Graves Commission money is immaterial.

Over the years, hundreds of thousands of dollars have been spent on maintaining the war cemeteries at Chaiwan and Stanley.

We make an annual parade of our grief and our remembrance of the dead at the Cenotaph, although the war has been over for 32 years.

Isn't it about time, even at this 11th hour, that we tried to do something positive for those who survived to give them some comfort and peace of mind in their last years?

Things would have been a lot worse but for organisations like the British Legion which has stepped in so often to help both the survivors and the dependents of servicemen who died.

Governments everywhere are ready to spend large sums of money recruiting soldiers in times of war and reminding citizens of their obligation to serve or fight for their country. But they very quickly forget their obligation to these men and their families when the war is over.

Hongkong's record is more dismal than most, having handed what small amount of reparations it received to the University of Hongkong.

In succeeding years many of our Volunteers who suffered imprisonment here and in Japan moved away to Britain, Canada, Australia and the United States until today only a handful of men remain.

Time is running out. These men cannot wait indefinitely for a Government committee to jaw its way through countless alternatives.

Better to make a start with something and add to it, and Finance branch can be assured it won't even make a dent in that \$903 million surplus.