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Action on war widows has come far too late

BRITAIN'S moral obligation to Hongkong's war widows is still far from being fulfilled. An announcement is expected later this month during a House of Lords debate which will contain a promise that sympathetic consideration will be given to each individual application for nationality – but only if the widow has been resident in Britain for five years, which is impossible under present conditions.

At a time when there is increasing pressure from influential quarters for a softening of Britain's hard-line immigration policy towards Hongkong, Lord Glenarthur should take the opportunity to end the impasse for the sake of a small and dwindling number of women and their families who have long deserved better treatment. The granting of residential rights, without a five-year qualification period, would merely be repaying a posthumous debt to the men who died in defence of the Empire.

Any relaxation of the provisions of the infamous British Nationality Act for the territory's war widows is now a case of too little too late; it is unlikely that any of the women, now in their latter years, will settle in Britain. It would simply be a symbolic gesture.

The British Government recognised the special status of war veterans in the British Nationality Act of 1981. Article 4(5) of the BNA allows the granting of automatic citizenship to any British subject who has rendered exceptional service to the

Crown. Pressure to include their widows and offspring has been resisted, despite vociferous campaigning by survivors and their sympathisers in Hongkong and Britain.

Article 4(5) is applied sparingly; of the more than 700 applications for automatic citizenship submitted up to last year only 54 had been granted, 46 to ex-servicemen. Britain's attitude seems all the more churlish because war widows want special consideration, not out of an urgent desire to live in Britain, but as a sign of honour for their late husbands.

The debate over the rights of the widows is only one part of the much wider discussion on the nationality issue in general. It has been rekindled by the Portuguese Government's decision to approve European Economic Community passports for 100,000 Macau residents who, theoretically, could qualify for residency status in Britain after 1992. The ensuing public criticism did prompt Britain to reiterate its promise that Hongkong visitors to the UK would not face discrimination and petty harassment at the point of entry, as has been the case in the past. Those who have experienced treatment like this at ports and airports have every reason to be sceptical.

Without raising futile hopes over the nationality issue, Britain could liberalise the application of Article 4(5), as a sign that Britain is prepared to honour its debt to the war dead of Hongkong.