

Afghan injury toll three times

By Gethin Chamberlain

A study submitted to the Ministry of Defence by the Royal Statistical Society has concluded that the true scale of casualties has been dramatically under-reported

THREE times as many British soldiers have been wounded in action in Afghanistan as the government has admitted, a report has concluded.

Defence chiefs claim it is "too difficult" to keep a record of every soldier injured fighting the Taliban, resulting in troops returning to the front after being patched up by medics and then left off official lists.

According to the Ministry of Defence (MoD), only 41 soldiers have been wounded in action in Afghanistan since the start of the year, despite British forces being involved in what has been described as the worst fighting since the Korean War.

But a study submitted to the MoD by the

vice-president of the Royal Statistical Society has concluded that the true scale of casualties has been dramatically under-reported.

Patrick Mercer, the Tory spokesman for homeland security, accused the government of distorting the figures to make casualty levels appear more acceptable to the public.

The government flatly denied a similar charge made two weeks ago in an email from Major Jon Swift, a British officer

serving in Afghanistan, who asserted that the "scale of casualties has not been properly reported and shows no sign of reducing".

That followed the revelation in The Sunday Telegraph in August that the MoD was failing to publish Afghanistan casualty figures despite promises by John Reid, the former defence secretary, that the public would be kept informed.

Yesterday the MoD confirmed that casualties admitted to field medical facilities — units staffed by a doctor and nurses — and later returned to the front were not counted as "wounded in action".

"The people we do not collate are those who do not need to be admitted but are treat-

Tory spokesman for homeland security accuses MoD of making casualty levels appear more acceptable by distorting figures. He says every military casualty is very carefully documented, but that the government has tinkered with the figures in some way.

ed in the field and returned to duty," a spokesman said. "To collate the statistics for every single admission would be difficult and it also begs the question about where you draw the line. It is very difficult often to say whether someone has been injured in action or it is a non-combat injury."

The latest casualty figures released by the

es higher than Britain admits

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MoD list only four soldiers wounded in action in August, although it is understood a further 10 were seriously injured in the last few days of the month — a period for which no official figures are available.

According to the MoD's published statistics, the 5,000-strong British force has suf-

killed since the start of the year and 128 listed as wounded in action.

A similar disparity in the casualty figures published by the two countries for operations in Iraq prompted a study in *The Lancet* earlier this year, which concluded that the number of British wounded there was three times higher

than the MoD's figure.

The report was compiled by Prof Sheila Bird, vice-president of the Royal Statistical

Society, who has now carried out a similar study of operations in Afghanistan, and a copy of the findings has been sent to the MoD.

Prof Bird, who is also the senior statistician for the Medical Research Council, said she believed that the figure for Afghanistan was three times higher than the MoD claimed.

She said she had looked at recent

Afghanistan casualty figures for US and Canadian forces and at Russian casualties from the 1980s. The ratio of injuries to death for each of those armies varied between three to one and four to one. If British forces sustained casualties at a similar rate, the number of British soldiers wounded in action would be between 100 and 140.

Mr Mercer said: "To say we don't record soldiers who are dealt with in the field is just nonsense. I can only assume it is to make the casualty levels seem more acceptable. Something odd is going on."

"In my experience every military casualty is very carefully documented and if these figures are being tinkered with in some way, then the government must explain what this is about." Two weeks ago *The Sunday Telegraph* revealed how soldiers were being treated alongside civilians on mixed NHS (National Health Service) wards because the volume of casualties from Afghanistan and Iraq had rendered the MoD's policy of using designated military wards "unsustainable". COURTESY THE SUNDAY TELEGRAPH

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ferred 35 deaths since the start of this year, with 41 injured in action, a ratio of little more than one to one.

In contrast, the United States had a ratio of one to three, with 278 soldiers killed since the start of the war in 2001 and 956 listed as wounded in action, while Canada had a ratio of one to four, with 29 of its 2,500 soldiers