

Sacking by e-mail is wrong, says Fox, but 17,000 more will go

Deborah Haynes Defence Editor

The first wave of redundancies in the Armed Forces after last year's defence review will be announced in April, with 17,000 jobs to go within four years.

The news comes as Liam Fox, the Defence Secretary, faced a barrage of questions in the Commons yesterday after 38 long-serving soldiers were mistakenly sacked by e-mail, including one man on an IT assignment in Afghanistan.

Dr Fox, flanked by fellow defence ministers, was summoned to the House to apologise for the blunder, which the Army is investigating. "This is a completely unacceptable way to treat anyone, not least our Armed Forces," he said. "The correct procedure was not followed. I regret this and reiterate the unreserved apology already made by the Army and on behalf of the MoD."

David Cameron signalled his frustration at the Ministry of Defence, which had already been caught out this week when details about the plan to cut a hundred of the RAF's trainee pilots leaked out in the media before the men and women had been notified.

"The Prime Minister is very, very clear that the way this has been han-

dled is completely unacceptable," his spokesman said. "This was an unacceptable way of dealing with our Armed Forces. The Prime Minister values their contribution extremely highly. It should not have been handled in this way."

The e-mail error emerged at a particularly sensitive time, with the military and their families waiting to hear about the planned redundancies. They are to take place each year for the next three years until the quota is reached. Each person will be given a 12-month notice period. The Army must lose 7,000 soldiers, while the RAF and the Navy face culls of 5,000 each.

The termination of the 38 warrant officers' contracts was part of the Army's internal attempts to balance its force structure and not part of the defence review cuts.

With the cuts putting their future in doubt, a number of servicemen and women are already exploring options in the private sector. Hugh Andrée, the founder of ForceSelect, a recruitment and support agency for former members of the Armed Forces, said he had seen a 30 per cent rise in interest in his company since the Government announced plans to shrink the military.

The queries came from all ranks



The Defence Secretary meeting Royal Marines from 3 Commando last month

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"right up to senior officer level", he said, and added that he expected even more queries once the targets for redundancy become clear in April.

Jim Murphy, the Shadow Defence Secretary, said: "Sacking anyone by e-mail is wrong. Sacking your Armed Forces in this way is unforgivable."

General Petraeus to quit, pages 10, 11

Immigration points system aids scientists

Mark Henderson, Richard Ford

Scientists are to be given priority for visas under the Government's immigration cap. It represents a victory for a campaign by *The Times* to prevent the quota damaging British research.

A new points system will benefit scientists and engineers when quotas for skilled migrant visas are introduced in April. Damian Green, the Immigration Minister, will announce today. Physicists, biochemists, chemists and research and development managers would be among those given a "significant advantage", he said.

In October, eight Nobel laureates wrote to *The Times* to protest that the cap "would damage our ability to recruit the brightest young talent as well as distinguished scientists into our universities and industries".

From April 6, 20,700 skilled migrant visas for non-EU workers will be available annually, with 4,200 awarded in April and 1,500 in subsequent months. All skilled workers will need a graduate-level job, must be able to speak an intermediate level of English and earn at least £20,000 a year.

Intra-company transfers to bring in people for more than a year to do specific jobs will be excluded from the cap, but a minimum salary of £40,000 will be introduced. Those working for less than a year will need to earn £24,000 or more.