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Yesterday in the House you raised the question of emergency telephone procedures following reports of an incident. On reflection I think our exchange may have left room for misunderstanding of the facility provided by the Service Information Centres and I thought it would be helpful to clarify the position.

As I said then we make every effort to inform the next-of-kin of any casualty at the very first opportunity. A personal call is made whenever possible and this happens in the vast majority of cases. The Service Information Centres do not replace this procedure but are an addition to it since they provide an enquiry point which can also be used by more distant relatives and friends.

I am sure you will appreciate the difficulties involved in collecting detailed information on casualties following Tuesday's incidents. The priority was to move survivors as quickly as possible to a safe place for treatment but the casualty centres and holding units are widely spread. In these circumstances the task of exhaustively checking names and units was a lengthy one and the information held even on Wednesday evening was still very sparse.

An official MOD statement often prompts families to ring the Service Information Centres, or MOD, in the hope of obtaining confirmation that their particular relative is safe. At the time



of the statements, made earlier this week, we were simply not in a position to do that. The intention of asking people not to ring in was to spare families and friends the frustration of a wasted phone call, which might only have added to their distress. However, the Centres have never closed down and anybody who did ring in - and many did - would have been answered sympathetically even although no further information was available.

I entirely take your point that there are occasions on which relatives and friends might wish to talk to someone who is sympathetic, even though that person has no concrete information to give them. In retrospect the announcement might have been slightly better worded to make it clearer that the phone lines were still open. I certainly would not wish to prevent anyone from ringing the Centres if they felt that would be helpful to them.

I am very conscious that families and friends need very special consideration because of the emotional strains that separation, the distance and the danger inevitably impose. I hope you will accept my assurance that we do our very best to take account of their needs and to provide them with the services they deserve.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Alan Beith who also raised this.