

**Damning verdict of inquiry Labour should have held**

# Britain rapped over foot and mouth 'cruelty'

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**BRITAIN'S** handling of the foot-and-mouth crisis was branded cruel, incompetent and confused yesterday.

The report of an EU investigation into last year's alert reveals the lack of a valid contingency plan, crippling bureaucracy and animal suffering on a massive scale.

It says the Government's policy of building massive funeral pyres of cattle was rushed through without taking into account the 'catastrophic' impact the images sent around the world would have on tourism.

Farmers were bullied into allowing their livestock to be killed, the report says, while many of the 4.5million animals suffered at the hands of poorly-trained volunteer slaughtermen.

The draft report is based on the EU Parliament's year-long inquiry, which was set up after Tony Blair refused to hold his own public investigation.

It suggests that apparent attempts by the Government to stifle the EU committee's findings have failed.

Agriculture Minister Lord Whitty visited the committee chairman, German Social Democrat MEP Wolfgang Kreissl-Doerfler, before the inquiry to

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put his Government's case. But the report pulls no punches over official involvement.

It concluded: 'The British Government's information policy was inadequate both before and during the crisis.'

Advice to farmers from Government departments was 'repeatedly altered, inconsistent or even contradictory'.

The report also says: 'In individual cases it was reported that farmers who were affected had been intimidated and pressurised in connection with the culls.'

'These shortcomings and the sometimes inadequate information policy caused considerable stress among those concerned, many of whom were still suffering psychologically as a result months after the crisis.'

The report suggests the Army was called in too late at a time when the epidemic was already out of control and animals had been dead for days.

One of its most damning findings is that the strategy of a mass cull probably did not work.

The report says: 'It remains contro-

versial and doubtful whether the hours continuous cull strategy was really responsible for curbing the epidemic.'

It goes on: 'The mass culls caused enormous problems of disposing of animal carcasses.'

The crisis could have been eased with vaccinations, the report says, but the Government bowed to pressure from the food industry, which opposed this.

The report also blames cuts in the number of vets and the closure of local vet centres for the weakened response.

Tory European agriculture spokesman Neil Parish said of the report: 'We were expecting a fairly weak report after Lord Whitty's visit to tone things down.'

'But this is a damning indictment of Tony Blair's Government's handling of the situation.'

The inquiry team of 25 MEPs took evidence from farmers, vets and local officials during hearings in Cumbria, North-East England, Scotland, Wales and the West Country.

It also visited France and Holland, complimenting the French on their 'efficient and successful' controls while criticising the Dutch for poor information and a slow response.

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