

from the CHAIRMAN

Welcome to the 2002 Annual Report of the Haslar Visitors Group.

This has not been an easy year. The Government has enacted yet another Asylum and Immigration Bill, making conditions even harder for asylum seekers. There is now yet another group of people who are deprived of any support.

The Government plans to lock up yet more people and keep others in centres analogous to open prisons. There is no evidence that detention makes the asylum process any quicker and more efficient. It is hugely expensive and there is ample evidence of the damage that detention does to many asylum seekers. We already lock up more asylum seekers than any other country in Europe (Refugee Action spokesman, BBC TV 2 February).

Obtaining bail has been made even more complicated by the new legislation as finding an address for someone entitled to no support is difficult.

The tabloids have continued to target asylum seekers against all the evidence. They stir up trouble by asserting that Britain is taking more than its fair share. UNHCR figures, published by the Guardian, show clearly that in a list of 17 European countries, Britain ranks in the lower half, equal 9th with Luxembourg. They have also recently tried to equate asylum seekers with terrorists. The Government and the Opposition have exploited this. In the last ten years, of 500,000 seeking asylum, only 3 have been definitely linked with terrorism (Independent, 1 February).

At the end of January, we had the tragic case of a Ukrainian committing suicide in Haslar. His appeals had failed and he was due to be removed to the Ukraine the next day. This despite the content of both an Amnesty International report and the Home Office's own country assessment. The latter includes the statements "there have been numerous reports of torture and ill treatment of suspects in police custody and prisons", "police and prison officials regularly beat detainees and prisoners" and "troops beat and torture inmates as part of regular training exercises". The Government have plainly failed to honour our obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention and the European Convention of Human Rights.

The need of detainees for visitors remains as great as ever.

I would like to thank all visitors for their work and their care for detainees throughout the year: in visiting detainees, in helping them in a variety of ways, in supporting them after release, in observing the conduct of appeal and bail hearings in court, and in numerous other ways. Please keep up the good work in 2003.

John Bingham

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE HASLAR VISITORS GROUP FOR THE YEAR 2002

LEGAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

Registered Charity no. 1080187

Registered address: All Saints Centre, Commercial Road, Portsmouth PO1 4BT

Governing document: Constitution adopted 18th January 2000

Trustees:

Commander John Bingham (Chairman)
Dr Timothy Bushell
Mrs Mary George (Secretary)
Mr Les Gibbons
Mr Richard Green
Mrs Jo Hunt
Mr Jean Pierre Paternoster (Treasurer)
Mrs Di White

Bankers: Lloyds TSB, 272 London Road, Waterlooville PO7 7HN

Coordinator: Mr Michael Woolley

Contact information:

Office address: All Saints Centre, Commercial Road, Portsmouth PO1 4BT
Telephone and fax: 023 9283 9222
Email: mw@haslarvisitors.org.uk
Website: www.haslarvisitors.org.uk

AIMS AND ORGANISATION

Purposes for which the charity is established: Relief of immigrants or refugees who are suffering hardship or distress or are in need, with particular reference, but without limiting the generality of the foregoing, to those who are imprisoned or detained by the Immigration Services of the United Kingdom whether in Holding Centres, Detention Centres, Prisons or Police Stations.

Organisation: The Charity is managed by an Executive Committee, consisting of the Trustees, which meets monthly. Day to day management is exercised by a salaried coordinator, Mr Michael Woolley, from the Haslar Visitors Group office. There is a monthly meeting for all members of the group to exchange information and receive reports from the Executive Committee and the Coordinator.

There have been no changes in the aims or organisation since the charity was registered.

Coordinator's Report

THE REFUGEE YEAR

2002 was a busy year for immigration and those who work with asylum seekers. In January the government, having tried to deport large numbers of Zimbabweans over Christmas, was forced by a short but forceful campaign into a change of policy. All 'removals' to that country were stopped. We played a part in the campaign by running a website to keep everyone informed.

In February Haslar Prison became 'Haslar Removal Centre', run under the Detention Centre Rules by the Prison Service. The Home Secretary announced that immigration detainees were no longer held in prison, and that while the newly re-named Haslar was not up to the standard of the other Removal Centres it was the Government's intention to make it so. There has been virtually no subsequent change in the buildings or the regime. The men are still locked up for 16 hours a day and still strip searched. They are no longer allowed to work.

The 2002 Nationality and Immigration Act was passed in November, making it harder to claim asylum and removing support from many asylum-seekers. The Visitors Group is already having to make emergency payments to destitute ex-detainees and has published a briefing paper on the emergency for local churches and charities.

HASLAR THE PLACE

Haslar is now undoubtedly the worst of all the centres in the detention estate. Places like Tinsley House are run as hostels with decent rooms shared with one or two others and freedom to move around throughout the day. Haslar is a mid 19th century barracks where the men live in bleak dormitories and are locked up for much of the time. Visitors to the inside of the place are shocked by the conditions – we arranged a tour for some French visitors who commented: *“The visit to Haslar was very hard. The situation these men experience is inhuman. I don't think I will ever forget that morning.”* And *“Haslar I will never forget. How can man inflict such indignity on his neighbour? The visit to the Haslar Centre was, as an experience, almost unbearable.”*

One detail of which we learnt during the year is that laundry is not sorted and the men have to wear each others uniforms including underwear. This has so outraged the National Union of Students that they are currently organising a 'Pants for Prisoners' campaign and sending pairs of fresh underpants to the Centre Manager for the use of detainees.

THE VISITORS GROUP

The Visitors Group has continued to grow throughout the year. We have a wide catchment area and now three venues for our monthly visitors meetings. We now have a programme of speakers in addition to the discussion which used to characterise the meetings.

As numbers have grown we are considering starting a Friends of Haslar Detainees scheme with an annual subscription and a quarterly newsletter. The aim is to keep in touch with retiring or 'resting' visitors and provide a way for people who cannot visit to make a contribution.

During 2002 we had two full day training sessions, the second particularly successful, organised in part by doctors from the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture.

We have also arranged tours of the Centre and opportunities to join Sunday worship for our visitors. In part these have been as the result of better relations with the Centre Manager, something we have actively tried to achieve while at the same time conserving our independence.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Various of our members have taken part in community meetings during the year, as speakers, exhibitors or organisers. For Refugee Week we facilitated an evening run by four ex-detainees which was widely felt to be very moving. For One World Week we organised, with others, a 'fair' on the Cathedral Green which attracted much attention. We have given classes in schools, spoken to assembled delegates at a meeting of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and spoken at many smaller meetings of, for example, Soroptomists, Quakers, and Prayer Groups.

OPERATIONS

Long term detention is coming to an end as the Home Office pursues a policy of detaining only at the end of the asylum process. The detainees now come and go much faster and the Coordinator is kept busier assigning them to visitors. We now have nearly ninety on the mailing list with fifty visiting at any one time. We usually have around sixty men on our books, a few of whom will probably never have visitors because of language difficulties.

A curious effect of the more rapid turnover is that numbers are falling – at one point, and very briefly, there were less than 100 of the 155 bed spaces occupied. The average is now around 140 compared with 150 twelve months ago.

One welcome development during 2002 is that a member, recently retired as a hospital consultant, has undertaken Medical Foundation training and is now very actively helping us with medical reports on men who have suffered torture. His reports are extremely professional and a number of men have gained their liberty with their aid. Having him working with us is a great asset.

THE FUTURE

The committee has agreed as an objective that we might, depending on funding, have an assistant coordinator during the coming year, and also agreed that we should try to provide an improved package for the coordinator. Meanwhile we are trying to improve the service we offer by wider delegation within our really very well qualified group of volunteers.

We are awaiting the reply to a Parliamentary Question, tabled for us by Lord Avebury, asking "...whether Her Majesty's Government will ask the Prison Service to increase visiting hours at Haslar and Lindholme to match those of privately run removal centres". We would very much like to see visiting hours extended into the evenings, allowing us to recruit working people as visitors.

Other objectives for the coming year are to draw further attention to the poor quality of the accommodation in Haslar and to win a change in the regime so the men spend less time under lock and key.

Michael Woolley

Treasurer's Report

During 2002 we have received generous donations from four major funders, Lloyd's TSB, The Hilden Trust and two people who wish to remain anonymous. We also received a number of other smaller donations and speaking fees. We are very grateful to all concerned as we start the year with a healthy balance.

It must be said however that Haslar Visitors has no investment income or long term donors and we have continuing anxiety about funding. We would like to expand our operation and take on an Assistant Coordinator and with this in mind we have decided to bid for 3 year lottery funding. After the problems suffered by the lottery over the funding of another immigration charity it is not certain that the bid will be successful. If not we shall have to continue to seek support from other charity funders, not an easy task in view of the current stock market fall. If anyone knows of a fundraiser who might be able to help us we should be very pleased to know.

With the ending of benefits for in-country applicants and the inefficiency of NASS in giving support for those who are appealing beyond the Tribunal stage we anticipate increasing need by destitute asylum seekers. The Visitors Group is mainly concerned with detained men but some do get released and we are therefore in contact with a number of people now encountering difficulties. We have already made a number of payments and anticipate that the problem will grow during 2003.

We are about to launch the 'Friends of Haslar Detainees' scheme and hope that will prove a good way of disseminating information and raising income. Friends will pay at least ten pounds a year but the cost to the group of sending out four newsletters will be very small and most of the money will make a small but useful contribution to welfare funds.

Jean Pierre Paternoster

Haslar Visitors Group

Registered Charity No 1080187

Statement of Accounts

Accounting period, Year ending 31st.December 2002

Income

Opening balance	19,017.34
Interest	16.41
Lloyds TSB	10,000.00
Hilden Trust	5,000.00
Donation	5,000.00
Donation	1,000.00
General donations	2,088.13
Petty cash	95.03
Unpaid cheques	22.44
TOTAL	42,239.35

Expenditure

Salary	12,718.56
Inland revenue	5,884.86
Give as you Earn	960.00
Coordinator's expenses	1,789.19
Telephone	1,133.08
Travel	29.59
Secretary's expenses	293.54
Insurance	355.69
AVID membership	150.00
Rent	984.00
Bank balance on 31.12.02	17,940.84
TOTAL	42,239.35

HAVANT COURT NEWS

A small group continue to monitor appeal and bail hearings at Havant Court. The court sits on Tuesdays and Fridays. If anyone would be interested in joining the rota and seeing just how adjudicators and the Home Office conduct business, please contact Patricia Bingham.

The statistics we produce are used by a number of solicitors as they are the only ones available. The Home Office do not publish anything similar for the system as a whole. Monitoring the court is not only about collecting the basic statistics for 6 monthly reports. Our presence there can, on occasions, help the asylum seeker, particularly if he is detained. If it is clear that he needs a new solicitor or the adjudicator tells him to find one, this can be passed to Michael or to BID(South) who can often help.

We can also help in other ways. When Thomas, from the Sudan, had a bail hearing last October the adjudicator made a remark that very much upset both Thomas and his very pregnant girl friend, who was also in court. Thomas asked us to complain on his behalf. We wrote to the Chief Adjudicator and, last month, received a letter from the adjudicator. In this she said "I do not exactly recall the bail hearing, however if any remarks I made at that time did cause offence, I wholeheartedly apologize to all parties and will endeavour that no such cause for complaint will occur again. Will you please pass on my apologies to all parties concerned." This has been passed to Mr and Mrs Thomas.

AVID has said that asylum seekers should always be given a receipt for documents retained by Immigration and other authorities. The Home Office replied in November that "it must be acknowledged that important documents are unlikely to go missing if they are ever held by the police or Immigration service." We were able to respond that we had observed 315 cases in the last 12 months and that, in 18 of these, the Home Office had lost or "mislaidd" documents. We gave the details. There were other cases where the Home Office representative had no file or what he had was incorrect or incomplete. We continued "If the sample recorded is typical, and there is nothing to suggest that it isn't, then if the IAA hears 20,000 appeals a year, there are likely to be 1143 cases where the Home Office has lost important documents."

Keeping watch on a small part of the system continues to prove worth while. BID(London) is setting up a pilot project to record some similar statistics at Hatton Cross.

John and Patricia Bingham

CASES OBSERVED

from November 2001 to October 2002

182 bail cases	for appellants of 34 different nationalities, at which		
	45 granted bail		
	38 bail renewed		
	99 turned down		
315 appeal cases	126 completed		
	26 withdrawn or abandoned		
	163 adjourned	61 problems with documents,	
		26 no representative for the appellant	
		18 request of the representative	
58 for a variety of reasons, including: a) a) the appellant not being brought from detention; b) b) the appellant being detained in Scotland; c) c) awaiting judgements in other courts; d) d) lack of the right interpreter; e) e) sickness, etc.			

INSIDE HASLAR

IRC Haslar Centre is a 19th century ex- barracks, where the men live in dormitories of thirty or so. They sleep in bleak and tiny cubicles without carpets or even a door, though window curtains have just been installed. The cubicles are shared with two strangers, beds sometimes so close together that they all touch and one man has to sleep with his head by another's feet. In some the heating consists of a single small pipe along the wall, though radiators have been installed in others.

Most dormitories have a dayroom 5 or 6m square, with a television, but no carpets, no curtains and rows of chairs in regimented lines. Two ramshackle telephone boxes stand on one wall. This room is part of the route from the rest of the centre to the cubicles and is both busy and noisy with telephones, television and tannoy in competition. There is no noise separation from the sleeping area. Despite the fresh grey paint the place feels startlingly gloomy in twenty first century Britain, reminiscent of some dim old agricultural shed.

In the bathroom there are half doors on the showers and the toilet stalls. At the time of (sometimes random) roll checks the good guards will allow a detainee sat on the toilet to show his hand. The less sympathetic members of staff open the lockless doors.

The men (Haslar is a male institution) are let out of their dormitories five days a week, three times a day, for three hours in the morning, three in the afternoon and two in the evening. In these periods they can attend the medical centre, change their kit, or go to classes in English, art or computers. If they are lucky they get a visit and go to the visits room. If they are unlucky they are strip-searched afterwards.

In the evenings they are allowed to go the chapel for 45 minutes. There is bingo on Saturday nights. There is a playing field and the men have occasional access. The rest of the time they sit round watching television and worrying. Some are there for months, and one or two for over a year. Immigration detainees are not charged with any crime – they are kept behind bars for administrative convenience.

Laundry is washed collectively and reallocated at random. The men much dislike using other peoples' underpants.

There is a shop selling foodstuffs, toiletries and stationery. The toiletries include toothpaste - one tube is provided free on arrival but further tubes have to be bought.

The dining room is dark painted and smells of cooking. The tables are small and the seats crammed together. The food is not bad, albeit school dinner style, portions generous.

Education is the one bright spot at Haslar. There are nearly forty up-to-date computers in various rooms. There are also two English rooms – space for maybe thirty men, an art room, a small library, and a pleasant little library reading room.

The education, though good, is not adequate compensation for the dreadful dormitories. Imagine being not only incarcerated in a place like that but also incarcerated with people you don't know, who may not share your language, who may not, in some cases, be particularly clean. Imagine having to use tenth hand underpants and having to drop them in front of the staff. And finally imagine that the sentence is indefinite and you might have to stay there for over a year. Grown men are often reduced to tears.

NO COMPARISON!

	Laundry	Accommodation	Cash Phone Card Benefits	Cheap Phone Cards	Visiting hours	Access to Property	Association Time
IRC HASLAR	Laundry done by staff but not sorted-reallocated at random, including underwear.	Small cubicles in dormitories of 30.	£2.50 a week. (£3 phone card on arrival).	Phone cards in the shop give a very poor rate.	12 hours a week	Property may only be posted-in.	8 hours a day. 16 hours locked in dormitories.
TINSLEY HOUSE GATWICK	Laundrette for detainees to do their own washing.	Spacious three bedded rooms.	£5 phone card a week. No cash given.	A variety of cards giving a good rate in the shop.	49 hours a week	Property may be handed-in or posted-in.	17 hours a day. 7 hours locked in rooms.

HOW CAN MAN INFLICT SUCH INDIGNITY ON HIS NEIGHBOUR?

A group of French visitors were deeply shocked by their visit to Haslar Removal Centre. La Fraternité, a church group in Rouen were invited by the Diocese of Portsmouth to look at asylum conditions in Britain in summer 2002.

La visite a Haslar fut tres dure. La situation que vivent ces hommes est inhumaine. Essayons de ne pas rester impuissant devant cette injustice. Je crois que je n'oublierai jamais cette matinee.

The visit to Haslar was very hard. The situation these men experience is inhuman. Let us try not to remain powerless before this injustice. I don't think I will ever forget that morning.

*Il n'y a pas de reponse a la question que nous posent le demandeur d'asile: "Je ne suis pas criminel, pourquoi est-ce qu'on me traite comme ca." **There is no answer to the Asylum Seeker's question: "I am no criminal, why am I being treated like this."***

Que nous nous sentons forces de les trailer d'une maniere si inhumaine?

Why are we driven to deal with them so inhumanely?

In February 2002 Haslar had an official inspection. The Visitors Group presented the following memo to the inspectors. Almost all the points are still valid. Over a year later the Prison Inspectors have still not reported and there are rumours that this is because their comments were so scathing.

Prison (Removal Centre) Inspection – Haslar – February 2002

Some Matters of Concern

1. **STRIP SEARCHES.** These are carried out on arrival, sometimes after visits, and on departure. The men are forced to strip completely. There may be a case for search on arrival but after visits it is a quite unnecessary humiliation. There has never been a drug problem at Haslar and mandatory testing has been dropped as a result. There doesn't seem any justification for searches on departure.
2. **WORK.** Until 8th February when Haslar became a Detention Centre about thirty of the men had paid employment in the kitchens, gardens, laundry and as cleaners. Outside contractors are now employed and the detainees have lost a source of income and occupation.
3. **VISITING HOURS.** These are about to be cut to two hours a day, six days a week. No other detention centre has such limited visiting – a particularly unfortunate matter in view of the prison's isolated position.
4. **OPEN DORMITORY HOURS DURING THE DAY.** These too are very limited – five hours a day four days a week. These are the only hours men can go to classes, change their kit or go to the gym.

5. 5. **CHAPEL ACCESS.** There is no access to the chapel on Sunday evening (though there is in the afternoon) or on Monday or Wednesday evenings. On four days a week there is supposed to be access for 45 minutes but in practice this is rarely more than 30 minutes and sometimes less.
6. 6. **COMPLAINTS.** The men tell us that there is a failure to reply promptly to complaints. The role of the Board of Visitors does not appear to be understood.
7. 7. **OFFICER IDENTIFICATION.** The officers should wear name tags.
8. 8. **HANDCUFFS.** The men are sometimes handcuffed when taken to hospital.
9. 9. **COURT TRANSPORT.** The men are almost never delivered to the courts on time. The Havant Hearings were re-scheduled from 10 to 10.30 because of this but the vans often arrive at 10.50 or later. Men are rarely produced in the York House or Taylor House Hearing Centres.
10. 10. **ACCESS TO COURT DETENTION ROOMS.** This is no longer allowed to family or sureties. People have often traveled long distances to attend a court appearance and some opportunity to greet the men should be allowed.
11. 11. **NOISY DORMITORIES.** There is considerable noise penetration from the day rooms to the sleeping cubicles. A soundproof division would improve matters.
12. 12. **COLD DORMITORIES.** Many cubicles are only heated by a pipe along the wall and though the Governor has recently increased the blanket allowance to three the only way many of the men can keep warm is to fold these double – making six layers but causing the blankets to frequently slip off.
13. 13. **DORMITORY A PRIVILEGES.** Dormitory A has a pool table etc dating from the time when the workers lived there. Now there are no workers it would be more equitable to site these facilities where all the men could use them.
14. 14. **DORMITORY TELEPHONES.** These are very frequently engaged. Extra telephones for incoming calls are needed.
15. 15. **FAX ACCESS.** This should be permitted to anywhere and to anyone provided the man is prepared to pay.
16. 16. **PHONE CARDS.** There are various cards available which are much cheaper than BT – a selection should be stocked in the shop.
17. 17. **DELIVERIES.** It would be helpful there were a system for items to be handed in at the gate. On one occasion a man's suitcase, brought down by courier from Heathrow, was turned away on the grounds that it should have been sent by post. Visitors often have small items (eg a book, a cassette, a sweater) which they could deliver rather than post

MIKAIL BODNARCHUK

Born Ukraine 1961

Died IRC Haslar 2003

Mikail's suicide illustrates the very real fears that some asylum seekers have of being returned to their own countries. Amnesty and the UK Home Office both report that torture is rife in the Ukraine and it seems that this man could not face that prospect.

HOME OFFICE COUNTRY ASSESSMENT

(UKRAINE HUMAN RIGHTS)

<http://www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk/default.asp?pageid=162>

6.3 The Constitution prohibits torture, but there have been numerous reports of torture and ill-treatment of suspects in police custody and prisons throughout Ukraine, in contravention of its commitments as a party to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, as well as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.[4b] Police and prison officials regularly beat detainees and prisoners, and there have been persistent reports that Berkut (special militia units or riot police) troops beat and torture inmates as part of regular training exercises. Two forms of torture reported are the "swallow" method, whereby the detainee is placed on his stomach and his feet are tied to his hands behind him, forcing his back to arch, and the "baby elephant" method, whereby a gas mask is placed on the victim's head and the flow of oxygen is slowly reduced. Another form of torture employed is called the "monument" method, whereby the detainee is suspended from his hands on a rope and beaten. Some detainees are beaten until they waive their right to a lawyer. There is no effective mechanism for registering complaints about mistreatment or for obtaining redress for such actions. Prisoners may address complaints to the Human Rights Ombudsman, who has received widespread reports of torture in pre-trial detention, but this avenue is limited by the Ombudsman's lack of enforcement authority, prisoners' fears of punishment for initiating complaints, and insufficient effort on the part of the government to end such practices or to punish those responsible. One positive step is a new Criminal Code that came into effect on 1 September 2001 mandating 3 to 10 years imprisonment for torture.[11a] and on 28 May 2002, in the first case brought by the Ombudsman against law enforcement agencies, the Frankivskiy district court in Lviv ordered the the Lviv prosecutor's office and the Security Service of Ukraine to pay damages to the parents of a man tortured to death in prison [56]

DESTITUTION AMONG ASYLUM SEEKERS

An edited version of a briefing paper distributed by Haslar Visitors in January

A new and urgent problem

The 2002 Nationality and Immigration Act, passed in November, makes large numbers of asylum seekers destitute from 8th January 2003. They are not allowed to work and have no right to benefits of any kind.

Who is affected

- • Those who have not applied for asylum 'as soon as is reasonably practicable' on arrival
- • those pursuing higher appeals in the courts.

There is no definition as to what is meant by 'as soon as is reasonably practicable'. The Refugee Council believes that in practice if asylum applicants do not apply at port on arrival they will not get Asylum Support. The new act has also removed other legal avenues through which local authorities were previously obliged to provide support to destitute asylum applicants.

Haslar Visitors are also pessimistic about the chances of support for people who have not applied at port or “reasonably” quickly. Our experience is that the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) is very bad at deciding what is reasonable. A recent report by the Citizens’ Advice Bureau on NASS says that already ‘in many cases vulnerable individuals have been left for weeks, or even months, without the means to buy food.’

Two Case studies

DC came to this country in 2001 and did not immediately apply for asylum. He had no idea when he fled that he had to apply at the British port and investigated how to go about making a claim within days of arrival. He won his case and is now an official refugee. Under the new regulations he would have been destitute for the 8 months it took for him to win refugee status.

TM came from Zimbabwe in 2001. In January 2002 the British Government decided not to return anyone to that country because conditions are so bad. However Zimbabwean asylum seekers still have to pursue their cases through the courts and TM recently lost an appeal in the High Court. He is now going to the House of Lords but his NASS support has been cut off and he is not allowed to work. Zimbabweans are currently making many asylum applications and as more cases end more people will be in TM’s situation: destitute and not allowed to work.

The Size of the Problem

The Government hopes that if no benefit is available no asylum seekers will claim “in country”. Refugee groups fear that large numbers will be forced to sleep on the streets and some may turn to crime in sheer desperation. There are various estimates as to how many people will be totally destitute but one reputable local body suggests that there will be 12-14 a week in Southampton alone.

The Challenge

- • Practical help is going to be needed throughout the country. This could be anything from a major financial grant to a cup of tea on a cold night.
- • Sympathy is also called for: remember asylum seekers will be destitute through no fault of their own and are not allowed to work.

System still 'unwell', but in recovery

Alan Travis, home affairs editor, Thursday February 6, 2003

Britain's asylum system is often described as chaotic, but the real diagnosis is that it is closer to signs of recovery with just some parts still in intensive care.

It is four years since the system meltdown at the notorious Lunar House, the Croydon headquarters of the Home Office's immigration and nationality directorate. The number of asylum applications dealt with then, had fallen to 800 a month.

The collapse was the outcome of an attempt by the then immigration minister, Ann Widdecombe, to tackle Whitehall's most notorious "bureaucratic swamp". In February 1997 she announced the introduction of a computer system, accompanied by a massive 1,200 cut in the number of experienced staff dealing with asylum cases.

Those mistakes were compounded under Jack Straw, who as home secretary reacted to problems with the new system by ordering the staff to move headquarters. The result was that the asylum system ground to a halt.

"Murphy's law is operating. Everything that could go wrong has gone wrong," he admitted.

The backlog of initial decisions rose from 56,000 cases in 1997 to a peak of 135,000 in January 2000. Fumigators had to be called in

when files were found rotting in the basement car park.

By any yardstick, the system was experiencing a catastrophic meltdown. It took an average of two years to take an initial decision on whether an asylum seeker had a genuine case or not. The accumulated numbers of asylum seekers waiting even for an initial decision put London and the Kent ports under great strain, and the dispersal system ensured that would-be refugees became a familiar sight in nearly all parts of Britain.

Since then more than £1bn of Treasury money has been spent trying to get the system working properly. It is showing signs of recovery. Initial decisions are given in about 7,000 cases each month - a figure that matches the level of fresh applications. Most are given within two months rather than two years, and a special clearance exercise has reduced the backlog to a more manageable 37,000.

At first the problem just moved down the line. As the number of people waiting for an initial decision fell, those waiting for appeals to be heard soared. But more money has been spent improving this part of the process.

The number of courtrooms dealing with asylum appeals has increased from 35 to 103 in the past three years, the numbers of

adjudicators has risen from 285 to 473, and instead of 600 interpreters, there are 1,300.

The tribunals deal with 6,000 appeals a month, and 20,000 are cases regarded as "work in progress". The official "recognition rate" has also increased.

Between 30% and 40% of applicants are given permission to stay in Britain; not just the one in 10 given full refugee status - a figure often cited by the tabloid press.

These improvements in dealing with initial decisions and appeals has not yet fed through to the removal of failed asylum seekers. Further, the national asylum support service for the 52,000 people who have been dispersed around Britain, has yet to prove a success.

Forced removals have increased from 4,800 in 1997 to 13,000 in 2002. But that steady progress has not kept pace with growing efficiency in processing the applications and appeals. As a result, many of the scare stories about asylum seekers now focus on the apparent failure to throw rejected asylum seekers out of the country.

Putting Asylum Seekers in Perspective in 2002 ...

Tourists:	24,000,000
Students:	3,000,000
Asylum Seekers:	84,000

and remember ... none of the
9/11 terrorists was an asylum
seeker.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

To help with non-judgemental visits to the men at Haslar contact us and:

BECOME A HASLAR VISITOR

Phone: 023 9283 9222

email: coordinator@haslarvisitors.org.uk

or write to:

Michael Woolley, All Saints Centre, Portsmouth PO1 4BT

Website: www.haslarvisitors.org.uk

Let your MP know what you think, and ask him to tell the Ministers (David Blunkett and Beverley Hughes). Remember 10 letters on any one issue is a big postbag for MPs.

WRITE TO YOUR MP

House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA

Haslar Visitors Group regularly supplies speakers to schools, colleges, churches etc. Consider suggesting us as speakers for your group.

INVITE A SPEAKER

Phone: 023 9283 9222

email: coordinator@haslarvisitors.org.uk

or write to:

Michael Woolley, All Saints Centre, Portsmouth PO1 4BT

Website: www.haslarvisitors.org.uk

Become a 'Friend of Haslar Detainees'. Friends receive a brief newsletter (normally two sides of A4) every quarter to keep them in touch. We suggest a minimum subscription of ten pounds a year and all proceeds go to the welfare of asylum seekers. To join fill the form overleaf and

BECOME A 'FRIEND OF HASLAR DETAINEES'

c/o Mrs Jo Hunt, The Rectory, Tower Close, Chichester PO19 1QN

Phone: 01243 531624

To keep up-to-date with refugee and asylum seeker issues send £15 to the Refugee Council and

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