

# Coordinator's Report

## **John Bosco, our Treasurer**

Bosco was deported in 2008. There is full news of him later in this Annual Report.

## **Haslar statistics**

In 2008 our group was in touch with over 300 men detained in Haslar. More than 200 received regular visits, others only received services such as the loan of a mobile phone or the collection of luggage: not all men ask for a visitor. Roughly a quarter were "removed" or "deported" to their own countries. Another quarter were freed in Britain, given "temporary admission" by the Home Office or bail by a judge. One man got what he doubtless hopes will be "permanent admission" by escaping.

## **The cost of removal**

There is of course a human cost but also a quantifiable financial one. At over £11,000 a forced removal costs ten times that of a voluntary one. In March we had an example of this in Haslar when a man was taken to Chad in Africa. We calculated the cost: seven nights in UK police cells at £459 per night = £3,213; return flights for the man and three escorts at an estimated £2000 each = £8,000; four rooms for one night in the Sheraton Addis Ababa at \$425 per room = £1,120; salaries and other expenses for the escorts. (When I was told that they had all stayed at the Sheraton I was incredulous - but later confirmed the fact along with the price. It is reputed to be the most expensive hotel in Africa).

The man was sent on paperwork known as an "EU letter" which the Chadians did not accept. John Bingham at BID says he can never remember Chad accepting an EU letter. And on top of all that expense the cost of his detention in Haslar on his return. Twelve to fifteen thousand pounds of taxpayers money wasted.

## **The cost of detention**

Estimates of the cost of detention vary between £200 a day (the National Audit Office) and £130 a day (the Minister). The human cost is terrible, months of men's lives wasted as tickets are organised. In January 2008 ten of the 47 people on our list had been in (purely administrative) immigration detention for over a year. In August a man was given temporary admission who had been in detention more than two years. There would be a great deal to be said for putting a limit on the length of detention as there is in most other European countries. If the Home Office cannot sort things out in, say, six months then the person concerned should be freed.

## **The Portsmouth All Saints Drop-in.**

There are now over 300 people attending the 'drop-in' we run in Portsmouth for asylum seekers and refugees (asylum seekers hope to stay permanently, refugees know they can). The drop-in began as an advice service and we still have professionals such as the Refugee Legal Service and the Red Cross in attendance. It is now also a community centre, a place to meet friends and have a coffee, as well as take an English class, check emails or get help filling some form.

## **Good news for families**

Early in 2008 there was good news when many asylum-seeking families in Portsmouth were given permission to stay. Hooray! But what a mess was made of the process. One family of six lived in the same house for five years but was evicted by the Home Office once they got status. They went into bed and breakfast for two weeks till a house was found by the local authority. The B&B couldn't accommodate all their stuff so we hired a van and put it into store for them and then

hired a van again to get it out. One of the things a small charity like ours can offer is flexibility and rapid response.

### **Destitution Fund**

We started the fund some years ago when the Government suddenly decided to stop supporting any asylum seeker who did not apply the moment they came into the country. Asylum seekers aren't allowed to work so this was a major problem. Many months later a policy change was forced by the courts but by then other areas of need had become apparent. One problem is with asylum seeking men who have British wives and partners. If the man loses his asylum claim he also loses his right to support in Portsmouth. His wife can get housing and financial support as a single mother but not if she has a partner living with her. Social services does not recognise the position of foreign fathers without the right to work. All very complicated but what it means in practice is that foreign fathers are required to leave their wives and children if they are to get government help. In practice many families forego the support and scrape by on what the mother gets. We are currently giving a small weekly allowance to five families like this.

### **Destitution fund loans**

A need which cropped up this year was with the late payment of benefits. Child tax credits typically take sixteen weeks to process, occasionally longer. The people waiting have just got refugee status and been moved to new homes with all the expense that that entails. They are people with no financial infrastructure – they cannot borrow from family or credit cards and probably do not have a bank account never mind an overdraft.

We have offered interest free loans in some such cases, sometimes for quite large sums. It is heartening to report that our loans have, almost without exception, been quickly and scrupulously repaid.

### **Databases**

Our office is run with the help of a 'detention' database specially created by RC - a backroom boy with a very low profile who never attends our meetings but who has given great service over the years. Thank you RC! This year we sold a version of the database to BID (the bail charity) and another visitors group is now interested. We invested the proceeds of the BID sale in a 'drop-in' database which promises to be equally useful.

### **Coordinators' conference**

Haslar Visitors Group was responsible for organising a very successful residential coordinators conference in June 2008.

### **Comings and goings**

Laura del Nevo left us at the end of August 2008 to go to a job in Whitehall organising volunteer visitor/inspectors to prisoners in police custody. Laura did a great job for Haslar Visitors and we owe her a considerable debt of gratitude. Anne Dickinson joined us in November and will take over from me when I retire in February 2009. Anne has travelled extensively and worked in a number of third world countries.

I retire after eight years in post during which time there have been five Governor/Managers at Haslar (Bennett, Jones, Draper, Killick, Baker), seven Secretaries of State for Immigration (Roche, Rooker, Hughes, Browne, McNulty, Byrne, Woolas) and five Home Secretaries (Straw, Blunkett, Clarke, Reid, Smith). Does this make them "here today gone tomorrow politicians" or me an old stick-in-the-mud?

One of the good things about a job like this is the volunteers who are tremendously supportive and kind – to the Coordinator as well as our clients. I shall miss you all and thank you all for your tremendous support.

*Michael Woolley*  
*Coordinator February 2009*