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Department of Social, Community
and Family Affairs

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From: Mel Cousins, Minister's Advise

(COUSINS_M)

TO: Brian Ó Raghallaigh, PO **

(BOR)

CC: Secretary

(SULLIVAN_E)

Subject: Draft letter to M/JELR

Brian

Here is the final draft of the letter to JOD. I understand it
went as it stands.

Mel

Mr John O Donoghue,
Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform,
72 - 76 St Stephen's Green,
Dublin 2.

23rd October 1997

Dear John,

I read the report in yesterday's Irish Independent concerning the "1,000 refugees" who had "disappeared" allegedly giving rise to fears of "major welfare fraud". Your Department reported in September that it had over 3,300 active asylum cases on hands at that time. My understanding is that my Department is paying some 2,000 asylum seekers and that that was conveyed to officials of your Department on Monday of this week. It would seem that the 1,000 cases disappeared, therefore, only in the sense that your Department brought its records up to date.

Details of the 1,000 cases have only now been provided to my Department so that the question of whether they received social welfare payments can be investigated. Until this is done, there is no evidence to indicate how many of these disappeared cases are or were in receipt of payments from my Department. I was surprised, therefore, that the story was run in the Independent in the terms in which it was presented and in particular, that a spokesman for your Department was reported as saying that "most of the missing 1,000 represent multiple applications for supplementary welfare".

I have no doubt that there is an element of fraud and abuse amongst some asylum seekers. I feel it is important that we concentrate our efforts on taking practical steps to identify this abuse, for example, through the introduction by your Department of information technology to assist in identifying multiple asylum claims lodged in your Department and through enhancing co-operation between our two Departments. I would point out that my officials are fully co-operating with your Department in attempting to address this issue both at a policy level on the Working Group on Illegal Immigrants and on the operational side through ongoing meetings with representatives of your Department and the Community Welfare service.

The validity of social welfare payments to asylum seekers relies on the identity established by your Department for the individuals concerned. The primary factor determining the cost of these payments is the length of time it takes to process asylum claims to finalisation. I understand that only a relative handful of claims have been finalised this year and I believe that yesterday's story shows that there are also fundamental inadequacies in the arrangements for registering and keeping track of applications for asylum. For these reasons, I feel it is vital that the resources devoted to accepting and processing claims for asylum be strengthened to exercise more control at the registration stage and to bring more claims to the decision stage.

My Department will provide any assistance it can in that regard, particularly in relation to the use of Information Technology, co-operation on operational matters and exchange of information. I believe that it is only through enhanced co-operation between both Departments, carried out in an atmosphere conducive to the establishment of close working relationships, that these issues can be satisfactorily addressed.

I look forward to discussing this with you on our next meeting.

Yours sincerely,

Dermot Ahern
Minister for Social, Community and Family Affairs