Number of asylum seekers drops in Britain

REUTERS, London

The number of people seeking asylum in Britain dropped sharply in the second quarter of this year, the government has reported.

The politically sensitive statistics showed there were 7,920 applications in the second quarter of 2004, 11 per cent less than in the previous quarter, but the Conservatives said the data offered no proof that foreigners were not entering the country clandestinely.

Most applications came from Iran, China and Somalia.

"We have made good progress in dramatically cutting asylum claims, which are now back down to 1997 levels, while removing a far greater proportion of asylum seekers than were being removed in Spring 1997," Home Office minister Des Browne said on Tuesday.

Asylum and immigration is sure to be a key issue at next year's expected general election.

Earlier in the year, spending watchdog the National Audit Office criticised the government's asylum data. It said they were mainly accurate but included some aspects that were "materially misleading".

Anti-immigration group MigrationWatch claimed this week that civil servants in the Home Office -- supposed to be politically neutral -- had been assigned to monitor and challenge its statements.

Conservative home affairs spokesman Humfrey Malins said the figures were meaningless.

"If there are fewer asylum applications in the last quarter, most people believe that that could mean greater numbers of people are still entering the country illegally -- because our borders are not secure -- and simply not bothering to claim asylum," he told BBC Radio.

Browne countered that the Conservatives were happy to seize on the figures when they showed a rising number of asylum seekers but now rubbished them because the trend had turned.

A Quadir Choudhury, chairman of Bangladesh Leasing and Finance Companies Association and managing director of Phoenix Leasing Company Ltd., hands over a cheque for Tk 10 lakh and 10 thousand to Prime Minister Khaleda Zia at her office recently for the flood-affected people.

PHOTO: STAR

The Communist Party of Bangladesh stages a demonstration in the city yesterday protesting police action on its leader Muzahidul Islam Selim and demanding release of its workers.