CARE4 CALAIS

CALAIS - STATUS REPORT APRIL 2017

Executive summary

- The clearance of the Calais camp has not addressed the underlying reasons why refugees arrive in Northern France, and has not stopped refugees from gathering there.
- Since the UK Government halted the transfer of minors in December of last year, minors have been returning to Calais.
- The terrible fire in the Dunkerque camp has only exacerbated the problem in the area, with many more, including families, now homeless.
- Refugees are now living in conditions far worse than those in the Jungle ever were – hiding and living rough on the streets of the outskirts of Calais, sleeping unsheltered, and facing increasing hostility from the police.
- Hugely alarming is the situation of the nearly 2,000 children who remain scattered around France. The UK Home Office's failure to fulfil its promise to support these vulnerable children to come to the UK, as demonstrated by the premature closure of the Dubs scheme, means they are now resuming dangerous and illegal attempts to get to the UK, playing into the hands of traffickers.
- This humanitarian crisis continues to worsen, with refugees facing deportation to dangerous home environments and an increasing number living in squalid conditions in and around northern France.
- Deportations to entry countries such as Italy and Greece are not only immoral, they will provide no long term solution as these countries are unable to cope with the already heavy burden placed upon them.

Background

Over the summer of 2015 a sharp increase in conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa led to over a million refugees entering Europe within 12 months. The majority settled in Germany, Sweden, Hungary and France. However a small number, those with a strong tie to the UK, came to Calais in a bid to reach the UK. This led to sudden and significant growth in the Calais Jungle refugee camp from around 400 people in early 2015 to over 6,000 by the end of that summer.

In February 2016, in an attempt to slow the growth of the Calais camp, over half the camp was bulldozed flat and many refugees were forcibly evicted from the tents and shelters in which they were living.

In March 2016, alarmed by the number of refugees entering Europe, EU leaders entered into a deal with Turkey that effectively stops Syrian refugees from entering Europe via Turkey and Greece and also provides for them to be sent back from Greece to Turkey. This deal was widely criticised for focusing on stemming migration and introducing forced returns, rather than on providing the protection that refugees need[(5)]. Following this deal the number of Syrian arrivals in the Calais camp fell as many Syrians became trapped in Greece.

Despite these two actions however, numbers in the Calais camp continued to grow and by mid 2016 there were an estimated 10,000 refugees in Calais, with the largest population being Afghan and the second largest Sudanese.

In October 2016 the French authorities demolished the Calais camp and bussed out nearly 7,500 refugees to government-run reception centres (CAOs) situated all over France. Of those who went on the buses, 52% were Sudanese and 28% were Afghan. Approximately 50% were later identified as having 'Dublin' fingerprints in other EU states (see later), and the vast majority were from refugee producing countries, as opposed to being the 'economic migrants' depicted by the UK media.

Calais today

It is now nearly six months since the last refugees were bussed out of the Calais 'Jungle' and the Jungle camp was bulldozed flat. However this demolition did not address the underlying reasons why refugees congregate in northern France, and why they have done so for a number of years.

The key reason for refugees arriving in Calais and the surrounding areas is that **if a person wants to claim UK asylum, they have to physically be in the UK.** However, as there is no legal way to gain entry, refugees must enter illegally in order to make a legal claim. Refugees therefore gather at points close to the UK border to attempt illegal entry to the UK.

The first refugees to return to Calais after the closure of the camp were the unaccompanied minors. This began in December 2016 with the first indication that the UK Home Office scheme to relocate children to the UK was being halted. Since then, as more and more children found out that they would not be transferred, minors have continued to arrive and it is currently estimated that at least 150 of the 500 people sleeping rough around Calais are under 18 years old.

Other reasons for people arriving in Calais over the last three months include the failures in the Dublin system (see below), the closure of the Dunkerque camp (also below) and desire for family reunification in the UK. As in prior years it is expected that arrivals will increase as the weather gets warmer and Mediterranean crossings increase. Horrifically, it has already been reported that more deaths in the Mediterranean have been reported in the first few months of this year than in the same period in the prior year[(4)].

It is important to note that, while numbers are so far comparatively low, the living conditions of refugees now in Calais are far worse than in the Jungle camp. Living rough on the streets means no access to sanitation at all, with scabies, fungal infections and gum infections at an all time high. An irregular and uncertain food supply, together with no shelter at all from the elements, combine to be severely detrimental to both long term physical and mental health.

In addition the town environment is increasingly hostile. The French authorities' determination to achieve and to demonstrate that Calais is now a 'migrant free zone' has meant that the police now focus on arrests and detention to discourage refugee presence on the streets. The feeling of hiding and insecurity is pervasive. This is also reflected in the broader French policy of increased deportation. Last summer the French Interior Minister strengthened legal processes enabling deportation under the Dublin Regulation and asked Prefectures to use a systematic application of these legal processes to increase such transfers. According to statistics provided by the Interior Ministry, 17,529 Dublin certificates were issued during the first 11 months of 2016, an unprecedented amount [(2)].

CARE4 CALAIS

Food Ban

On 2 March 2017, the Mayor of Calais banned by decree the distribution of food in a large area of Calais town. However this ban was later overturned by the Court in Lille at the joint request of associations working with the migrants. The judgement was interesting as it reflected several points made earlier in the month by France's 'Defender of Rights' and in particular it went as far as to note that **it is not the prospect of finding a minimal amount of humanitarian aid, but the geographical sltuation of Calais that attracts migrants wishing to go to Britain to the territory**.

However, despite the court findings, police continue to intervene in food distributions, closing them down after one hour and delivering ongoing intimidation and arrests. The only respite that the refugees get from this continual harassment is provided at the two local day centres run by the associations in Calais town.

One of the most difficult problems faced by the refugees is the ongoing harassment from the authorities. Being continually moved on, having no safe place to stay, never getting more than a couple of hours unbroken sleep is severely detrimental to health but even worse attacks the spirit of the refugees, which is devastating to see.

Dunkerque

Following demolition of the Calais camp in October 2016 the population in the Dunkerque camp grew from around 500 people to an estimated 1,500 in early 2017. Living conditions were squalid, including bed bugs and rats, insufficient electricity, and unsafe and unhygienic surroundings.

On 10 April 2017 a terrible fire destroyed the camp, leaving the inhabitants, including many families, homeless. In the following days the French authorities shipped out around 1,000 refugees to government-run reception centres around France; however many were unwilling to go and indeed some had come back to the area having left these centres once before. Figures are not yet clear but those unaccounted for have exacerbated the issues of people living rough in the Pas de Calais region. It is understood that at least 80 unaccompanied minors were amongst those made homeless by the Dunkerque fire.

Small camps

We are aware of at least three small 'camps' in the Pas De Calais region, and several smaller encampments that pop up and move on a sporadic basis, hosting maybe 400-500 refugees in total. The living conditions vary and some are very poor with no running water, sanitation, cooking, heating or washing facilities. Those living in these camps are in daily fear of the authorities, with police visits taking place on a regular basis that often include confiscation of the refugees' sleeping bags and other possessions. It is interesting to note that when similar events occurred in Paris they were greeted with widespread outrage[(3)], however near Calais this takes place more often but there is no public knowledge.

Unaccompanied minors and the Dubs scheme

1,900 children were among the refugees bussed out of the Calais jungle in October 2016. Although it had been promised that the children would be sent to special children's centres, many of the centres did not find out that they were receiving children until the night before they arrived, and no special provisions or facilities were provided. We are aware of one centre where the children were housed in a shelter for French homeless adults, some of whom had alcohol and drug problems.

Due in part to public pressure, the UK government had agreed to accept between 1,000 and 3,000 refugee children from Europe. However, on 8 February 2017, the Government announced it would be ending the 'Dubs' scheme, despite only 350 children having been transferred. Human Rights Watch reported that the process for children to seek transfer to the UK had been non-transparent and arbitrary, and they had not been given information about the outcome of their cases. It also reported that the Dubs amendment criteria adopted by the Home Office had been restrictive, with the child's best interest not being used as the predominant factor[(1)].

Care4Calais has since met a number of these children who were shocked and despairing after leaving the French reception centres on receiving this news. This is a grave concern because there is nowhere else that is safe for them to stay. In both Calais and Paris, refugees are sleeping in the streets in appalling conditions, and warnings about trafficking have been issued. We have also had reports of children being told to leave their centres because they had been age assessed to be 18 years old. Many are now missing.

Both Safe Passage UK and the French legal centre continue to progress claims for family reunification under the 'Dublin' process for some of these children who have parents or siblings in the UK, but the process is agonisingly slow and the criteria disappointingly restrictive. On 26 April 2017 it was announced that just 130 more children would be brought to the UK under the Dubs scheme.

St Omer

The children's centre at St Omer is the main state run facility for unaccompanied minors in the Pas de Calais region. Around 200 children pass through its doors each month but the retention rate is low. Staff there tell us that they are sorely stretched just to collect and bring back all the minors that they get calls about each day, and they have little time for any other services. The main benefit of this centre is that the child gets a few nights' safe sleep and showering facilities. We have been told that another centre will open in the region at some point to increase capacity, but so far there is no further news.

Paris

An evacuation similar to that in Calais took place in Paris on 4 November 16, transferring 3,800 refugees to CAOs (French Government run reception centres). Following this an official centre was opened in Paris with 400 places where refugees can stay for up to ten days before being transferred to CAO centres elsewhere in France. We understand that since opening over 20,000 people have passed through this facility, however, this capacity has not been enough and hundreds of people continue to sleep in the streets.

On 11 February, research by the Refugee Rights Data Project, published in *The Independent*, found that refugees sleeping on the streets in Paris were subjected to extreme hostility and aggression from the French police. According to the report, refugees' blankets and sleeping bags were stolen, and they were being "violently" forced to move on, including being beaten and tear gassed by officers.

In Paris, too, there are reports of bans on food distribution in areas of the city, as voluntary organisations are told to move on from certain places.

Failure of Dublin System

Unlike Calais, the refugees in Paris are generally there because they want to claim asylum in France and the official Paris centre is the only route into the French reception centre process. Although this route has worked for some refugees, there are many where it has not and it has been estimated that only 30% of those entering the official centre are actually transferred on to the CAOs. There are many reasons for this, but one of the biggest is due to the 'Dublin' system for determining which EU state has responsibility for a person's asylum claim.

Up to 50% of the refugees in Paris and in Calais have already been identified as entering the EU via a state other than France and, under the Dublin system, this generally means that it will be that EU state of entry that has responsibility for their asylum claim. This system of allocation of refugees has been widely criticised as putting an unfair burden on border states such as Italy and Greece, who are simply not able to cope with the high number of refugees created by the current scale of strife in the Middle East and North Africa.

The Dublin regulation has also been criticised as undermining refugee rights and failing to provide fair and effective protection to refugees. As noted above the French authorities are now pursuing a policy of increased deportations under the Dublin system.

Belgium

As life in France has become more difficult, refugees are also living on the streets in Zeebrugge and Brussels and making similar, desperate and illegal attempts to reach the UK. Conditions are as bad as Calais or Paris, with people sleeping rough on the streets with no access to sanitation or regular food. Although social housing was set up over the winter in Brussels, this closed at the start of April. We currently visit around 300 people in Brussels and 60 in Zeebrugge with no access to regular food, sanitation or safe sleep.

The CAOs (French reception centres)

The CAOs were intended as a temporary solution only on closure of the Calais jungle. The refugees were given a four week period in the CAOs to decide whether to claim asylum in France or to leave the country.

Care4Calais has received feedback from refugees in over 150 CAOs and has visited 50 CAOs. The CAOs vary greatly in nature and standard, from apartments for families with modern appliances to disused school or hospital buildings containing makeshift beds with only two toilets and two showers for 50 people.

In over 50% of cases refugees report being reasonably comfortable. The most commonly cited problem is with food – either not receiving halal food (which they often require for religious reasons) or not getting enough food. In some cases this is being slowly resolved.

Some of the most worrying reports include racial protests, sometimes violent, against the centres (Arzon, Vouneuil-sur-Vienne), delayed or withheld access to medical care (Laval, Grenoble, Bou) and lack of access to interpreters (commonly reported across CAOs). More recently there are problems with CAOs closing and refugees, including minors, being told to leave.

The UK's responsibility

Any sustainable long term solution to the refugee problem in northern France requires recognition of the underlying reasons that refugees travel there. Many have close family or community ties to the UK, have served with the British Army in Afghanistan, or have lived in the UK previously. To date

the UK has refused to take any responsibility for these people, who are now in desperate need through no fault of their own.

There is no morally acceptable reason why the UK should not contribute its fair share to help in what has now become one of the greatest humanitarian crises of our time. This applies as much in northern France as it does to the refugee crisis across the whole of Europe.

In addition to providing a fair share of places, we must also create safe passage for genuine refugees, and establish a means whereby those in genuine need of UK asylum can be safely processed without the need to risk their lives by attempting to enter the UK illegally.

When the Home Office issued guidance on unaccompanied minors that places harmful restrictions on the transfer of minors over the age of 12 to the UK, it thereby backtracked on previous commitments made by the Government, agreed on both sides of the House of Commons and in the House of Lords, and codified in the Dubs amendment.

We are extremely disappointed to see the Government continue to fall short of its commitments to help refugees. Its recent failure to ensure that the UK's vow to take in 3,000 unaccompanied child refugees was fulfilled – and more widely, a refusal to take responsibility for the pledges the UK have made to alleviate the plight of refugees – are shameful and will be a low point in our history.

More broadly, the UK's complicity in the EU-Turkey deal and its proposed replication with other countries is morally reprehensible. The deal commoditises refugees and is contrary to the spirit of international law designed to protect refugees. It is unacceptable that the Government has agreed to it on behalf of the UK public, who have not be given the truth about its damaging effects on hundreds of thousands of people in need. Protecting some of the world's most vulnerable people is not optional, and should not be negotiated for humanitarian aid or trade deals.

Until the UK Government recognises the vital role it must play to achieve a longer-term solution, the situation only looks to worsen. Many vulnerable people have been abandoned and are urgently at risk. The refugee crisis has not gone away; it is worse than ever and the current approach of sweeping it under the carpet represents the unacceptable prioritisation of short-term politics over people's lives.

---

(1) https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/21/france/uk-lone-children-calais-left-limbo

(2) http://www.lacimade.org/dublin-vers-un-durcissement/

(3) http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/french-police-stealing-blankets-migrants-paris-msf-a7516171.html

(4) http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/iom-525-refugees-die-sea-weeks-2017-170314115725176.html

(5) http://www.msf.org/en/article/eu-states%E2%80%99-dangerous-approach-migration-places-asylum-jeopardy-worldwide