

Calais: The humanitarian crisis at our doorstep



Day-Mer Turkish and Kurdish Community Centre
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1. Introduction

On Saturday 17 October 2015, a delegation from Day-Mer Turkish and Kurdish Community Centre set out on an observation mission to Calais to visit the notorious “jungle” where thousands of refugees risk their lives every day attempting to cross the Channel into the UK. In the week leading up to our visit three refugees were killed trying to cross the border, including a mother and child. Our aim was to deliver the donations we had collected and see for ourselves the conditions. Our delegation to Calais included writers, journalists, lawyers, teachers, students, workers and artists from London, some of whom had been refugees themselves. The aims of the visit were as follows:



a) Fact finding

Collect information on the number of refugees based in the Calais “jungle”, the demographics and immediate needs of the population, as well as finding those particularly vulnerable refugees who are harder to reach.

b) Scope

Identify and, where possible, establish contact with organisations and groups already providing support. Assess the impact of current efforts, including the successes, challenges and limitations.

c) Feedback

Raise awareness and disseminate information through Day-Mer to other organisations, groups and the Turkish and Kurdish community with the aim of informing, planning and coordinating future efforts and visits.

Many reports and news stories have been disseminated in recent weeks about Calais. Our aim is not to duplicate effort. Our aim is make an impact by strengthening the efforts of our friends in sister organisations, through closer more effective co-ordination and by calling to account our government for its failure to address this dire humanitarian crisis on our door step and by providing practical assistance aimed at alleviating the suffering of our brothers and sisters in Calais.

The number of refugees now in Calais is approximately 6000 – 7000. For many refugees Calais is seen as a chance to escape war, poverty, famine, disease, and genocide. The reality is a site abandoned in no man’s land between two of the most developed nations in the world, escaping from which requires risking lives and relying on human traffickers. At the time of writing this statement, reports are surfacing that the French riot police are lining up in Calais as the government plans to relocate the refugees in and around France, raising concerns about how they will get access to the help they so desperately need.

2. Observations

It is impossible not to empathise with the refugees in Calais. What we saw were thousands of young men, women and children attempting to survive in desperately unsafe and inhumane conditions.



It is no exaggeration to say that what we observed in Calais was a failure to us as human beings because what is immediately apparent is the complete failure to meet the basic needs of the people living in the “jungle”. As we approached the entrance of the site, thousands of dilapidated tents, stretching out into the horizon, could be seen. People could be seen wondering about, either at a loss for a way to pass the time or contemplating their next attempt at crossing the channel. It is possible to see in the eyes of every single individual in the “jungle” their determination to survive and their desperation to escape to the UK. This desperation is amplified by the absence of access to basic human needs such as clean food, water, shelter and clothing. No doubt the hostile welcome from France will have only strengthened their resolve cross the Channel.

One of the first things that we noticed at the camp was the overwhelming stench emanating from the path made up of thick raw sewage, mud and rain. Hot water and sufficient sanitary facilities are non-existent. Volunteer medical professionals operate on site but cannot possibly fill the vast gap of what is needed. In the few hours we were at the site three ambulances were called for injured refugees. It is a wonder that people in the camp are able to survive as long as they do, particularly as we found out the limited water available has tested positive for E Coli and hundreds of people are already dying or getting injured trying to cross the channel. What is also astonishing is the length of time the refugees have waited here, ranging from days to years, only to risk their lives yet again crossing the border.

The inhabitants of the “jungle” live in makeshift tents, which have been repaired piecemeal using whatever plastic and waterproof materials are available. The tents we saw were leaking heavily and the mud seeped inside the tents and sleeping areas. As the evening got colder we observed young men, women and children waiting, shivering in the cold rainy mud, some wearing only light jackets and flipflops. Not long before we left there was heavy rainfall which continued until after we left, the last images we were left with was that of the refugees resigned to the rainfall and the streams of mud and sewage running into the tents.

Food is clearly scarce, and only those fortunate enough to have any money left were able to buy food and drink from a few makeshift restaurants and stores. There did not appear to be a central soup kitchen or any organization providing much needed hot food. It was also unclear who the ‘restaurants and shops’ are run by raising concerns about whether basic necessities were getting through to the vulnerable in the jungle.

What is also shocking is how young the individuals in Calais are, most of them still children. Some of them were born in the jungle and are clinging on to life, having never known anything other than the dire life presented to them in “jungle”. The women and children in particular are vulnerable to human traffickers and abuse.

3. Thoughts

It is deplorable that Europe which plays an active role on waging war under the pretense of saving lives and ending the suffering of people in faraway lands, shows no interest in addressing the consequences of their actions overseas. Furthermore, it is appalling that Europe continues to fail to provide a safety to these refugees.



There is no real political will to help those in Calais and the inhabitants of the "jungle" know that they have been forsaken and ignored even when they are at the heart of Europe and on the doorstep of the country where they wish start rebuilding their lives following their escape from war and persecution. The tabloids and mainstream politicians frequently argue that those in Calais are economic migrants and should have claimed asylum in the first safe country but this reveals a complete lack of understanding of the reality of escaping war torn countries. Most of the refugees will have come part or all the way with 'agents' (human traffickers) and these young people cannot be expected to know how to navigate legal systems and procedures.

Capitalism often espouses the virtues of hard work and aspiration but these qualities are reserved for the select few. For regular workers freedom of movement remains restricted and tough but possible. For businesses freedom of movement is the de facto position, and capitalism frequently trumpets the importance of allowing the free movement of money and wealth. Somewhat ironically, such "privileges" are removed from vulnerable refugees and migrants from war torn countries. It is precisely these people that are most in need of opportunity. They have fought and struggled to stay alive, they have persevered in the face of atrocities and countless adversity. They already know that they have to work hard if they want to secure a better life for themselves and their families. The West, often the cause of such destruction in the home countries of migrants and refugees, is also simultaneously a symbol of hope for those who dream of safety and security. Sadly the reception they receive from so called "safe" countries is far from humane and is embodied in the atrocious conditions.

There is a lot of excellent work being done by small local groups, charities, and individuals such as Doctors of the World on the ground in Calais but the efforts are insufficiently coordinated and resources are scarce. The weight of the larger charitable organisations, experienced in setting up refugee camps and supporting refugees in large scale emergency situations is needed in Calais. There is a desperate need for international charities such as the Red Cross and UNHCR to step in and provide urgent support and humanitarian relief for the vulnerable inhabitants of Calais.



4. Demands

- We demand that the **French and British governments accept responsibility** for what is becoming an increasing crisis between two of the most economically advanced countries.
- We demand that the British Government set aside **a fund for supporting the refugees in Calais**.
- We invite **trade unions work together to jointly support this campaign** to persuade the British Government to accept their responsibility in this crisis and make a commitment to help those in need.
- We call on **national and international charities to play a more active role** in providing relief to the refugees in Calais.
- We invite **all charities, organisations and groups to co-ordinate efforts** to ensure all aid is managed effectively and reaches all refugees in Calais.
- **Join us to campaign for a compassionate solution to the refugees in Calais.**

5. How individuals can help

If you are a member of the public:

- **Donate** - As the winter approaches there is increased concern for the welfare of those in Calais. There is still a high need for waterproof jackets, waterproof shoes and boots, jumpers, tents, sleeping bags, socks, scarves, hats, gloves and new underwear. There is also a need for basic hygiene products. For example toothpaste, toothbrushes, hand sanitisers, nappies, feminine hygiene products.
- **Write to your MP** – Write to your local MP and council to share your concerns about the circumstances in Calais and demand that the borders be opened.
- **Get in touch** with us to support and be part of the effort.

For more information:

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