

Reflections on the trip to Calais March 2017

Firstly thank you to all of you who have so generously given to support refugees in Calais and Dunkirk. Our visit confirmed that our help is still much needed. Staying for five days allowed us to see and hear more of the lives of the refugees in northern France. It has revealed to us some shocking details during our conversations with the young people and those working with them. It is quite surreal to think this place is so close to home!



There are hundreds of refugees, mostly boys in their mid to late teens sleeping rough on the streets and in woods around Calais with no access to shelter. The only food and supplies they get is what voluntary support groups are able to give them. French law bans all assistance to migrants unless it is deemed necessary to protect 'their dignity and physical integrity'.

Providing accommodation is not allowed. The official Dunkirk refugee camp is woefully overcrowded and the refugee centres in various parts of France provide a solution for some people. However, for many conditions are worse than The Jungle ever was.

Isaias (not his real name), a 17-year-old from Eritrea told us a little of his story, which is replicated many times over in the Calais area. He has an aunt in the UK who he could live with if only he could get there. Like many Eritreans, he is a Christian and his face lit up when Svenja pulled a small wooden cross from her pocket. He asked for us to pray with him. Some of the young people ask where God is in their troubled lives, and we spent time talking and praying.



During the day, Isaias finds shelter in the Secours Catholique Day Centre, which opens its door to young refugees every day. Here they can warm up, rest, get some breakfast with a cup of sweet hot chai and have a shower. We volunteered here to teach some basic English, give a listening ear and play games to provide some distraction from the troubles of each day. A football, a kite provided by ArtRefuge UK and a game of Rummikub can bring smiles and laughter to young people even here. At 5 o'clock the 40 to 60 young people gather to walk for about an hour to the food distribution. Whilst we were in France the ban on providing food to the refugees, which had been imposed by the local mayor a few weeks earlier, was lifted! This meant the food distribution no longer had to move each day to avoid being stopped by the police. This did not prevent three large police vans from turning up! About 30 police officers some armed with pepper spray walked towards the food distribution. To us it seemed that their sole aim was to intimidate the volunteers and refugees.





Volunteers from the Migrant Kitchen cook filling, tasty hot food, which is served from a small van. The refugees eat quickly, sitting on steps, rocks or just standing in the cold wind, which always seems to blow in Calais. After about an hour the numbers dwindle as slowly small groups of refugees merge into the local woods where they try to find a sheltered spot to rest.

However, sleep is unlikely for these young people. It is illegal to sleep rough so the police scour the area at night and will move them on. Those who can run fast will escape and find another shelter, maybe under a bridge. Those who are too slow, often including the few women amongst the group tell us they get beaten and kicked by the police and maybe detained for the night. We saw the bruises in the morning and gave out cream to soothe skin irritated from pepper spray. Chris was able to give advice on medical conditions and provide some basic medicines. Care4Calais were able to arrange for four people to see a local dentist.



Each day new refugees arrive, often hungry and in need of clothing, shoes and basic hygiene items. The Care4Calais team, that we took your donations to, sends out a small team each day to find new arrivals at the local bus and train station, giving out dry clothes, snacks and other essentials. Often people have not eaten for days. Having donations of food and clothing to take to Calais as well as monetary donations to buy the right things for specific needs has been immensely valuable and greatly appreciated.

Many thanks and God bless you all

Chris & Svenja Powell for Christians Together Canterbury

'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' (Luke 10:27)

