

“I was the head of aviation security at Kabul airport ...”
Reflections on conversations in the Calais “Jungle”, July 14th 2016

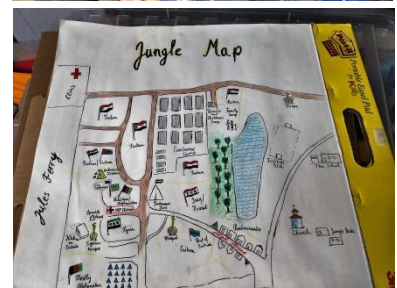


One of the two Care4Calais warehouses is completely empty.

The other is barely two thirds full. In the ten months since starting to visit, we have never seen it like this. It is a far, far cry from the time last September when donations were coming in faster than warehouses could be found. The aid now is only the raw essentials – and there is nowhere near enough to meet the needs.

The estimates are that 7,000 refugees are in Calais – many at the camp, some on patches of ground around the edges of the town, and along the coast to Dunkirk. About thirty people are arriving each day; some days twenty, some days fifty. The 400 blankets and fifty water butts that we have brought will very quickly be given to new arrivals. A map in the Care4Calais warehouse shows the extent of the camp, and the numerous nationalities living there.

Every bit of charity here is piecemeal: small and dedicated groups doing what they can. Where, in all these months, have the aid agencies been? Where are they now? Only Médecins sans



Frontières is present here, focussed on medical aid. In such circumstances, as the donations to these little groups dry up, food is – for the first time – becoming a significant problem. We met a lady from the “Calais Kitchen” who provide 2000 meals a day, usually in the late afternoon. They collaborate with other groups and each day take a different section of the camp. They feed 2,000 people each day – 14,000 meals each week – for 8,000 euro a week. **Efficient and brilliant use of money, and absolutely vital aid. Until last Thursday when the money literally ran out. The 2,000 people due to get meals that day did not get them.** They had launched an emergency appeal on social media, raised 24,000 euros, and that will keep things going for another three weeks. **This is pitiful, hand-to-mouth aid.**

With empty warehouses and a situation that feels perilous, we were asked to go into the camp with a survey, to find out how the distributions of scarce food and clothing could be arranged in ways that better help the refugees – and above all diminish the long, long lines that appear whenever there is a distribution – lines that lead to frustration, and that are dehumanizing. Imagine, day after day, month after month, queuing for an hour and more – in all weathers – for the bare essentials.

The survey gave an opportunity for the deepest conversations that I have had with the refugees; it was a luxury, really, to talk at length, to understand better where people have started from. I also had an interpreter, a wonderful Afghani. His story? He had served as the head of aviation security at Kabul airport – he had been so well regarded that he had welcomed teams from Heathrow and Gatwick to see his work in Kabul. He earned \$1400/month – an excellent salary. He had assisted the British when the army was there. All this he told me in a gentle tone – there was no boasting or hubris, simply a professional, with professional pride, telling me his story.

And then, of course, the British left Afghanistan, and the Taliban took control, and people who had worked alongside the British were in peril. As he told me the next part, tears filled his eyes. This young, gifted man told me of the family back in Afghanistan, who continued to live in fear. His parents and siblings. **“This is not a matter just of my own life,” he said, “but my family as well.”** **And in the Calais sunshine I felt the depth and rawness of his emotion, the pressure this young man carries with all the expectations, hopes and dreams of his family on his shoulders and in his heart. What are we doing, that people of such gifts, such courage and skill and decency, are consigned to sand dunes in a forgotten bit of Europe?**



All afternoon I chatted with professional, gifted people. I met a wedding photographer from Ethiopia, a Computer Science student from Kandahar, a man with a Masters in Business Administration who had worked in logistics for an American firm. Then the Taliban came: destruction. In a particularly poignant way, I heard of the literal razing to the ground of a business – a man who had nurtured his 3,000 vines in the Afghan countryside, producing beautiful wines, until snipers started using the trees for cover. The Taliban response: “They cut down all the trees,” he said, “I had nothing left. And I had to get out, get away.” I saw the marks of brutality; after one long conversation a man turned slightly,

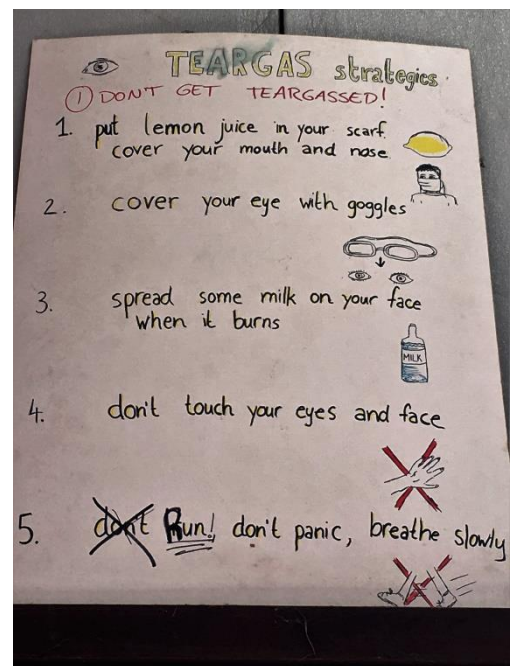
and raised the back of his shirt. I saw lacerations, scars from whips. He put down his shirt and looked at me – there was no need for any more words.

Later, I met a businessman, who had run an import/export business in soap and detergent products. He had been forced out by ISIS. He told me, “I have been here for a year. I tried for six months [to get to England]. I nearly died. So I have given up. And now I stay here.” In the Calais Jungle, he was running a little shop – using his gifts and talents to make a living there.

Throughout the afternoon I looked into the eyes of people perhaps ten or twenty years younger than me who had already lived for more lifetimes than I will ever know; often, tears welled up, and they shared their stories while looking at me through glistening eyes. Yet these are not men seeking pity, or handouts. I met only decency, and dignity – such extraordinary dignity. **These are gifted, courageous men who just want a chance to live in peace.**

What are they met with, if they leave the Calais camp? Having fled the brutality of their home countries, they are now being met with tear gas, rubber bullets, and truncheons in France. I met a medical team and asked them about what I was hearing; “Yes,” they said, “Every day we treat legs and arms that are fractured and bruised from police beatings. Last week we took seven people to hospital; they were concussed from blows to the head.” The tear gas is especially insidious – lungs are choked up to such a degree that it can take three or four days to start breathing normally again. At the Care4Calais warehouse there is a “Tear Gas Strategy” for volunteers – so indiscriminately is tear gas used, sometimes.

Of course, some argue that the police need to be so violent to stop incursions over the border, to stop lorries and ports being broken into. Undoubtedly, the Calais police face great difficulties and troubles, night after night.



But is this it, then? Refugees with no defences, refugees who have travelled thousands of miles to flee atrocities more horrific than many of us could ever imagine, refugees with gifts and talents desperate to start a new life – these people, our brothers and sisters, being clubbed off border fences, choked with tear gas and shot at with rubber bullets. In Northern Europe. In 2016.



It was a very sombre afternoon – perhaps with some irony on the sunniest day that we have experienced in all the trips to Calais. These conversations took place under cloudless skies. And in amongst all that was so sad, there were flashes of hope and inspiration. We met an artist who had brought seven small tins of paint, each a colour of the rainbow. On a path, he was picking up pieces of gravel, and dipping them in the paint, then placing them. It was a real labour of love – but a few hours later, with the paint quickly drying in the sun, we returned along the same piece of path to find the flashes of colour completed, and an utterly uplifting delight of the rainbow colours interspersed with the rest

of the gravel for a stretch of 200 – 300 metres. Such projects matter – not least because they restore some humanity, offer some warmth, and show the refugees they are not forgotten.



And then, at the end of the day, we met Sammy – if you have read the May reflection (*if not, you will find it at www.basildoncatholics.org*) you will remember our impromptu invite for tea with the Kuwaiti Bedouins. Niamh recognised Sammy, with delight – and in her back pack she had the hair gel that we had promised to bring. It was a wonderful moment, something to bring a much needed smile.

As always, in the minibus and on the ferry home, we took time for prayer and reflection. Joe – a young adult from Laindon - was with us for the first time. With Liam and Conor he had been involved in a distribution of toiletries throughout the afternoon, and he summed up the potential in the camp very well: **“There is such amazing creativity,” he said, “And a community spirit. There is hope, actually, because they are showing us that different nations can mix, can live peacefully. I was worried before I went in; I thought it might be hostile. But all I experienced was safety, community and peace.”**

*We travel from Basildon approximately once a month with aid; you can read all the reports back to September 2015 at www.basildoncatholics.org. **As ever, thank you** to all who have donated so far. Financial donations mean we can buy large numbers of the same item, at wholesale rates, which is the best way to supply aid in terms of both practicality and value.*

*As media attention has shifted away from the refugee crisis in Europe, so too donations have dropped, as this latest report very sadly shows. We will continue to use all donations directly to support the refugees - **literally every penny is spent on aid**, delivered directly to the warehouse (our ferry and petrol costs are privately funded).*

Cheques can be made payable to “Our Lady and All Saints”, and posted to:

*Fr Dominic Howarth,
Calais Appeal,
Holy Trinity Church,
71 Wickhay,
Basildon
SS15 5AD.*

*Many, many thanks for any support that you can give. **To set up your own project, or to volunteer at the Camp, seek advice – please don’t just turn up at the Camp. Contact Seeking Sanctuary (migrantsupport@aol.com) or Care4Calais via Facebook and they will help you.***