

## “Meeting Need” – Our December visit to the ‘Jungle’



Last Friday we went back to the Calais refugee camp for our 4<sup>th</sup> month running, with a mini bus and a car rammed full of brand new donations. This time we had a team of 14 of us ready to hand it all out and become more informed about the situation in the jungle through our collective experiences and desire to in some small way help.



Our December Team from Tunbridge Wells and London

Each month we have tried to learn from the refugees living in the camp what they need most, and through constant liaison with Dominique, who is a Secours Catholique volunteer with extensive knowledge of the camp, we have come up with a ‘wish list’ on Amazon that we have promoted through social media. This month, in addition to the £5500 worth of items bought through the ‘wishlist’, we also had a generous donation of £3000 from Caritas. This money was to be used specifically for women and children within the camp.

We decided to produce ‘dignity packs’ for women to include the things they had asked for on our last visit. We used the £3000 to produce 200 of these packs.

Each pack included a pair of gloves, hat, pair of socks & a bag that contained underwear, sanitary towels, antibac hand wash, toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, lip balm, biodegradable sanitary towels, and hygiene/face wipes.



The dignity packs were very well received, we prioritized giving them to the young single and most vulnerable women. The items that seemed to be most appreciated were the underwear, wipes, lip-balm and wind up torches (& obviously the warm winter items that we knew were needed throughout the camp). A number of women asked if we had more sanitary products (in addition to those in the packs). We gave them more, but also pointed them in the direction of the women's centre. The women's centre in the camp is well stocked with sanitary items, but not everyone is aware of this yet, and so many women are still struggling without them. The toothpaste was, on the whole, not needed by most as this has been well distributed and lasts a long time.



We have appreciated the opportunity over the past few months to distribute items hand-to-hand; to walk through the camp; to get the chance to speak to people, share a cup of tea with them; get a tiny glimpse of what it is like for them living in the 'jungle'. Once again it was humbling and distressing. Here are a few of our observations:

This month we noticed a subtle but evident shift in the camp from temporary to semi-permanent. The camp has grown rapidly from less than 1000 people to over 7000 in just a few months. With so many arriving and very few leaving there has been the need for 'higher order' social needs to be met, in addition to the very immediate practical needs. Already this is being addressed with churches, shops, restaurants, schools, a theatre, a play area for children, a library and a women's centre. This is all essential and important, but also a realisation for those living there that this is likely to be 'home' for the immediate future. There was an undercurrent of boredom/apathy that can come from long periods of inactivity. Is there more that we can/should be doing to support the growing numbers of disaffected young men?

There are also an increasing number of women and children. The day we went was a bright sunny day so a lot of the children were out and walking around. There is now a 'family camp' full of tents and caravans housing young families, and many others within the smaller communities throughout the camp.

The conditions in the camp have continued to deteriorate – whilst some of the largest piles of rubbish have now been removed, the mud is everywhere. There is a huge area of marsh and boggy paths that are essential to walk through to get from one side of the camp to the other. The logistics of keeping dwellings clean and dry is a daily struggle.



Warm winter items such as gloves, socks, hats and coats are still in high demand. Most people had shoes but few had ones appropriate to cope with the huge puddles and fields of mud.

The items most requested were underwear for men and women and warm trousers, tops, leggings and tights. Many people also asked for bags to store their belongings in. A big concern for the women (& men) is washing clothes. If the rain holds off long enough to wash clothes, it is very rarely warm enough for them to dry. Men and women therefore have to wear underwear and trousers until they are no longer functional and then dispose of them. It is likely that large donations of underwear will be needed and useful for several months to come.

We had many requests for wind up torches. We took 400, but could easily have handed out triple that. Without electricity in the camp at night, wind up torches add extra safety for the vulnerable.

Most children we saw had shoes/boots and a coat, but several parents approached us to ask if we had scarves or gloves for their children, or any activities (colouring books, pens) that they could have. Thankfully we did, and will continue to bring little activity packs for children on subsequent trips.



Finally, It is hard to process how I feel having come back from the camp this time. I am humbled and inspired by the people we met last week. People who are raising children, cooking meals, worshipping, building homes, learning languages, starting businesses and creating community against all the odds in a muddy patch of land under a flyover on the French border. Such creativity, courage and resourcefulness is truly an honour to witness.

I am also devastated that people have to do this. Have to choose to cling on to hope everyday in the face of such adversity. Have to queue for water, basic resources, food... and may still go without. That many will not experience what it is to feel warm or dry this winter. That some will die this winter in that camp, less than 2 hours away from our home.

## **Plan for January**

There is a huge amount of help still needed in that camp. But from the information we gained from our trip last week, and given what we know we are capable of achieving in a month, this is our proposal for our next trip to the Calais camp. We want to put together at least 200 more packs for women, and also 500 specific packs for men.

The women's packs will include: 4 pairs of underwear, two pairs of leggings, hygiene wipes, tissues and a wind up torch. (Approximately £12.50 per pack)

The packs for men will include: 4 pairs of underwear, a long sleeved thermal top, hygiene wipes, tissues and a wind up torch. (Approximately £13 per pack)

All those items will be bought brand new. We will also take as many good quality second hand coats as we can collect, and we will once again fill our pockets with activity packs, treats and warm items for the children in the camp.

We are aiming to buy 50-60 backpacks for our January trip to fill up and wear during distribution (as we have done each trip), but this time be able to hand them to those that need them when they are empty.

We will also be taking large quantities of tarpaulin to continue to support the building of more weatherproof dwellings in the 'jungle'.

The provisional date for our next aid drop is January 27<sup>th</sup>, but we plan to do a reccy trip on January 7<sup>th</sup> to touch base with other voluntary organizations in the camp, and make sure that the items above are still the most useful items to take (while there is still time to make changes to the wishlist).

