

Clearing the “Jungle”: The Calais Refugee Operation. “Humanitarian” Police State

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Global Research, October 26, 2016

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

“We don’t know yet where we are going, but it will obviously be better than the Jungle, which was made for animals, not humans.” — Wahid, Afghan refugee, PRI, Oct 24, 2016

It grew out as an organic consequence of failure – a failure on the part of Europe’s authorities to come to some measure of proportionate and even handed procedures to assess and process desperate refugees who have very little intention of returning back to their countries.

Calais’ informal camp, which came to be known as the Jungle, had 7,000 residents from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, among other countries, living in squalid conditions, an assemblage perched tantalisingly close to the English coast. Since Monday, more than 4,000 individuals have been moved. The operation has involved the tearing down of wooden shacks and the deployment of diggers to remove debris.

Aware of the political message it might convey, French authorities have insisted on a dismantling process to be done essentially by hand. This has merely cloaked the cynicism further, as it would make little difference to some of the residents determined to make a fist of keeping the “Jungle” tradition alive in some form. The promise of sub-camps sprouting in the environs of the Channel coast is already being made.

The Jungle tradition has not merely seen residents dig in their heels in the hope of making a stand, but local, sometimes violent resistance. Forms of violence, in short, have proliferated, be they at the hands of tear gas used by police authorities, or thugs keen to brandish their patriotic credentials.

Research by Arshad Isakjee and Thom Davis also warn about “the invisible public health dangers that refugees have suffered, and the microbiological threats of living in such squalid conditions – conditions that the state could easily have chosen to improve.”[1]

Moved camp residents have already made something of an impression by decamping to the Miramar hotel in Saint German-sur-Ay. Alternatives have been thin on the ground. Selecting it was primarily based on the resort’s emptiness at this time of the year. Some local residents have been far from impressed, worried by the prevalence of young, desperate men who might prey on empty homes.

At the very least, some measure of processing is being promised, even if it does little to deal with the problem as a system. On Tuesday, 1,264 adults were taken to shelters across the country, while 372 unaccompanied children were located to what are termed “provisional reception centres” within the camp, adapted from converted shipping containers.

All in all, a confused doctrine of mismanagement has reigned. French authorities have shown little interest in ameliorating conditions within the camp, falling short of minimum humanitarian standards outlined by the UNHCR and the Sphere Project[2].

From across the Channel, Britain's cooperation has been resolutely stubborn, at points verging on complete indifference to chances of accepting the refugees. "The situation is unacceptable and everyone knows it," claimed the French President, François Hollande on a September visit to Calais.

That unacceptable situation, something Hollande has done little to alleviate, has also been reciprocated by Britain's security moves. If anything, the cooperative dimension has tended to involve a vast securitisation of the refugee problem. Less emphasis here is placed on settlement programs but those of policing, control and repulsion.

While residents in the camp suffered from food shortages and miserable conditions of shelter, the UK got busy beefing up border security in its efforts to shut off points of entry. From 2014, £12m over three years was committed, comprising, amongst other things, the building of a 15ft fence along the motorway leading to the port.[3]

In August 2015, France and the UK made an agreement outlining new measures specific to Calais, among them a "control and command centre" and the deployment of 500 more French and British police.[4]

Some French political figures have decided to capitalise on the point, treating the refugees as subjects of electioneering worth. Hollande, it is argued, must carry the can on this point, largely for being soft with Britain's share of the bargain.

British Home Secretary Amber Rudd inched a bit closer to some rapprochement with a promise that half of the camp's unaccompanied children would be taken to British shores, though it's a meagre concession. The move is being facilitated by what has been termed the "Dubs" amendment to the Immigration Act, permitting vulnerable children of a certain category to be admitted, despite not having family residing in the country.

The principle behind this entire operation remains one and the same. Far from having a human element, it bristles with a security rationale. It was, in fact, left to an umbrella of non-government organisations to fill the human void, among them Secours Catholique, Kitchen In Calais and Care 4 Calais, to name but a sprinkling.

There will be those from the inhuman Jungle who will find settlement; few will find their way to Britain. Others intend resisting the thousand or so riot police slated for the operation. But the failings in Calais will simply be propagated further, a story not merely of French but European mismanagement. Bureaucracy, and security, remain twinned policy rationales in the global refugee crisis.

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Notes

[1] <https://theconversation.com/as-the-calais-camp-is-demolished-a-hidden-crisis--continues-for-refugees-living-in-squalor-67573>

[2] <http://www.spherehandbook.org/en/excreta-disposal-standard-2-appropriate-and-adequate--toilet-facilities/>

[3] <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-33267137>

[4] <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-33267137>

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