

Forests and The Migration Crisis : Belgian Authorities Slash Trees ‘To Stop Migrants Hiding’

The Flemish highways agency this week admitted it was cutting down trees to stop migrants hiding behind them. NICK MEYNEN argues that the story is a perfect illustration of tunnel vision applied in and beyond Belgium

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Featured image: Trees cut next to a highway in Belgium – to stop migrants from hiding in between them ([Source](#))

There’s so much wrong with this story, it’s difficult to know where to start. So let’s begin with the forests in Flanders fields – or lack thereof. After all, [no other region in the EU has so little forest as Flanders](#).

A protest group recently [planted three billboards outside Wachtebeke](#) – inspired by the Oscar-winning film – with the message:

“Since you’ve been minister, 2,000 hectares of forest have been destroyed. You promised a plan for forest conservation. What are you waiting for?”

Fair enough: they were targeting the minister for the environment, who once said that ‘[a tree was always meant to be cut down](#)’. In the highway story, it’s the minister for mobility who made it possible to start felling trees as soon as people start hiding behind them.

Refugee-hunting

Unfortunately, it seems to be hunting season on both trees and migrants. The Belgian police’s cat-and-mouse game with distressed refugees living miserably on the side of the highway as they try to reach the UK is attracting [more and more coverage](#).

It all fits in an atmosphere fueled by **Theo Francken**, the Flemish nationalist secretary of state for migration and asylum, who recently said we need to “[push back the boats](#)” coming into Greece.

He also declared part of Brussels as “[cleaned up](#)” after asylum seekers sleeping on the street were rounded up and [handed over to the Sudanese police to be tortured](#).

Francken uses language that was last used when Jews were deported from Belgium to camps in Germany, but this hasn’t prevented him from quickly becoming the most popular politician in the country.

Meanwhile, amid all the refugee-hunting, the real life stories of the people who slept in the few sleeping bags found in that little patch of forest remain untold.

Open letter

As bad as the story already is, there's another angle. The trees' location alongside the busy E313 motorway – which connects Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and the UK – did not go unnoticed as people reacted to the story.

The key function of those trees was not to provide the heartbreaking setting for a dystopian game of hide-and-seek, but rather as a limited defense in absorbing some of the deadly fumes coming from the highway.

While Belgium has a long history of breaching European air quality standards, there is a recent surge in public anger about the fact that one person dies every hour just from breathing Belgium's air.

According to one method of measurement, [Belgium's air is almost the worst of Europe](#), second only to Montenegro. People in Antwerp have recently launched a court case demanding drastic emergency measures to tackle toxic air.

Their campaign was launched with a passionate open letter from Jeroen Olyslaegers, the leading Belgian author, which began: "[Dear concerned parents that have children with lungs](#)".

Grassroots movements

Now [parents are protesting in front of their children's schools](#), after a documentary on national TV showed just how toxic some of Belgium's playgrounds have become.

A national newspaper is working with a university on a massive air quality project – planting [20,000 monitoring](#) stations all across the country, and reporting on the issue in the hard hitting style of the [Keep it in the Ground series](#) from *The Guardian*.

I live in a country where institutions rarely work together at all, but where they complement each other when it comes to destroying the natural world and increasing the suffering of fellow human beings.

But it sometimes takes one action that is testimony to utter cruelty and stupidity before the wider narrative can change – just as the full horror of the Windrush scandal is revealed in the UK –

The silver lining to this story is that grassroots movements – such as those forming around concerned parents' objection to their children breathing harmful air – create new and flourishing political spaces.

Pruning season

Something as crazy as cutting down trees to stop people hiding behind them provides an opportunity to ask, '*are you serious?*' about wider regressive policies.

Politicians ignore the anger over air pollution at their own peril. Local elections are slated for

October while regional, national and European elections are in a year from now.

The reaction from the highways agency after the inevitable Twitter storm broke out only added insult to injury. They did finally issue an apology, but not because they cut the trees. The agency apologised for cutting the trees right in the pruning season.

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