

# **‘The Situation is Catastrophic’: Inside France’s Brutal Evictions of Refugees**

The conditions faced by refugees in northern France are now “more precarious than ever,” humanitarian charities say.

“They came with chainsaws and cleared that whole area,” said Jamal, a 24-year-old Sudanese refugee who fled war in Darfur, gesturing at the mass of sodden tree stumps that once were a verdant forest on the outskirts of Calais. “We know they don’t want us here. But we don’t want to be here either.”

Most of the makeshift refugee campsites that remain in Calais lie barren after municipal teams from the French port city cut hundreds of trees down last month. “Now it’s a jungle without trees,” added Jamal, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, fearing repercussions from the authorities. “Everything in our lives is getting more difficult.”

Jamal is referring to the ramshackle Calais “Jungle”, which at its peak in 2015 became a semi-permanent slum city, housing 12,000 asylum seekers as men, women, and children fled from war and persecution en masse to Europe. But following its destruction in October 2016, and subsequent efforts to prevent “fixation points” from forming, the camps are now a tenth of the size and scattered into fragments across the city and its suburbs.

Humanitarian charities told VICE World News on a recent visit that the conditions faced by refugees in northern France are now “more precarious than ever”. People in Calais want to reach the UK before strict Brexit policies come into play, with many seeing the UK as providing better living conditions than those afforded in the rest of Europe. But the rise of anti-immigration politics, blocks on crucial NGO support, and uncertainty brought on by the coronavirus pandemic and Brexit is creating a hostile atmosphere that is pushing people to the edge – and some beyond it to their deaths.

“The situation is catastrophic,” said Siloé Medriane, coordinator for Utopia56, French nonprofit supporting refugees in Calais. “They are all across the city and

the outskirts. It's a lot more difficult for us to help them because there is no longer one place with thousands of refugees but several with hundreds. For them, it's just about survival now."

According to Medriane, curbs imposed by the French state against aid for refugees have caused the situation to decline further. Last month large rocks were installed to block roads near the historic Fort Nieulay, an area close to the entrance of the Eurotunnel where charities provide food and support to refugees. La Vie Active, the only charity mandated by the state, has stopped distributing meals at the location, citing a lack of need. Since September, charities have also been banned from distributing food in Calais city centre.

Human Rights Observers (HRO), which monitors the almost daily evictions of refugee campsites in Calais and Grand-Synthe, near to Dunkirk, said it received 30 fines worth nearly €4,000 (about £3,500) for carrying out its work during lockdown in November and December. "Police will often use excessive force against us while we are carrying out our work," said Isabella Anderson, a field coordinator for HRO. "We're always pushed and shoved."

For some of those working in Calais, the moves to hinder humanitarian aid are proof of France's failure to deal with the refugee crisis. "The outcome of policy is that people are in a constant state of precarity," said Alex McDonald, programmes manager in France for Collective Aid, which supports rough sleepers in Calais. "It's very clear that refugees aren't welcome. But the state doesn't have a solution that works."

According to McDonald, this hostility extends far beyond targeting NGO work and pervades the daily experience of refugees – through evictions, confiscation of possessions, and arbitrary identity checks in the street. Those checks took a more sinister turn earlier this month in Grande-Synthe, when several refugees, including those working as volunteers for a charity, were prevented from entering a supermarket.

In a statement, the prefecture said the checks were in "strict compliance with the law". But Akim Toualbia, president of the group Solidarity Border, which provides nightly support to refugees in Dunkirk, insists the incident was discrimination. "They let everyone with white skin past, and nobody else could enter. Even volunteers that were asylum seekers were ID'd and stopped," he said.

Ahmed, a 17-year-old refugee from Algeria, who has been in France since May, said police have also racially abused him. "Once the police told me 'go back to your country!'" he said. "I just want for people to have a basic respect for my dignity. I haven't stolen, I'm not a criminal and I came here with a visa. We are humans, we need to survive. Their strategy is to weaken us," said Ahmed, who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Recent freezing temperatures have led to even tougher conditions outdoors. Collective Aid said it had given out 80 hypothermia kits since November and Utopia 56 has accompanied three refugees suffering from hypothermia to the hospital. But France's Plan Grand Froid, a policy that requires all rough sleepers to be housed by the state in certain conditions, has not been activated so far this winter despite snow this weekend.

Juliette Delaplace of Secours Catholique, which runs the only permanent centre in Calais city centre for refugees, said that the government's treatment of refugees is part of an "inefficient and inhuman politics" that has worsened since Gérald Darmanin became France's Minister of the Interior in July 2020. "It's been years that there has been this politics of repression, violence and harassment and it doesn't work," she said. "We consider it illegal and we demand that shelter be offered in Calais."

This perfect storm is pushing refugees into even more perilous journeys to the UK, often with ramshackle, barely seaworthy boats provided by traffickers rather than the overland routes once preferred. In 2020, there were more than 9,500 attempts to cross the Channel, according to France's maritime prefecture - four times more than in 2019. On Saturday, another 36 refugees reached the UK in two boats.

But other attempts have ended in tragedy. On the 19th of August, one Sudanese refugee, who had his claim for asylum in France refused, drowned while trying to cross the Channel using an inflatable dinghy with shovels for oars. On the 18th of October, a 32-year-old Iranian named Behzad Bagheri-Parvin washed up dead on a beach close to Calais. On the 27th of October, a family of Iranian Kurds, including three children, died after their dinghy capsized off the coast of Dunkirk. On the 20th of November, Mohammad Khamis, a 20-year-old Sudanese was crushed by a lorry in Calais, fleeing police that had fired teargas.

"It's the police that killed him," said Medriane of Utopia56, who had personally worked with Khamis. "But on the documents, you would never see that written. He died because he was crushed by a lorry, but he was being chased by the police, there was gas everywhere. He ran, to try to escape the police. He was very young. But nothing will change. It wasn't the first death and it won't be the last, unfortunately."

Despite the grim events, Mustafa, another 20-year-old refugee from Sudan, who had met Khamis in Calais, is undeterred. "Yes, I saw him around here," said Mustafa, who spoke on the condition of anonymity. "Of course it's dangerous, but I can't live here. It's very difficult here. The French police are totally violent. When it's dark, and the cameras can't see they attack you and use tasers."

Mustafa, who has been in Calais for six months, still hopes to cross to the UK but fears that Brexit may thwart him. "I don't know about the asylum system after Brexit," he said. "It's a big question mark. I don't know if I will be accepted."

The full impact of Brexit remains to be seen but there are fears it will cause a tightening of asylum policy. The Home Office has yet to explain if unaccompanied minors will be allowed to rejoin their families in the UK post-Brexit or how it will return people to EU countries now the UK no longer follows the Dublin Regulation, a European Union law that states refugees must apply for asylum at the first country they enter in Europe.

"I'm afraid that in the future refugees won't even be able to have a real legal case heard after Brexit," said Imogen Hardman, operations coordinator for Care4Calais in Calais. "I'm concerned about what will happen if they are caught trying to cross now. For me, it's about what the UK government can get away with doing and whether the refugees will still properly be able to have their asylum cases heard."

One of the few certainties is that border policing in northern France will be as strong as ever. In November, the UK and France announced a deal to double the number of French police patrolling the coast, with an enhanced package of surveillance technology, including drones, radar equipment, cameras, and optronic binoculars. Under Le Touquet agreement, which allows British border checks to be carried out in France and vice versa, the UK paid £150 million between 2015 and 2019.

With policies tested in Calais likely to have implications across the continent, those future developments will be closely watched. "This area is a zone of experimentation in France, but also within Europe, to test new security policies," said Ellen Ackroyd, field manager for northern France at Help Refugees. "Whatever is not contested, you can be assured that model will probably be adopted in other places."

The French Interior Ministry and prefecture of Pas-de-Calais did not respond to requests for comment.

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