



Migrants eating a lunch provided by the French organization La Belle Étoile, near the port. Despite government efforts to discourage it, civil society is supporting them.

Photographs by Susan Meiselas/Magnum Photos for the International Herald Tribune

## Port without shelter: Migrants in Calais

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through port controls, and those that British immigration operates on French soil, and make it across the English Channel, the smugglers will collect the €300 to €700, or \$500 to \$1,100, that the migrants have already paid into a blocked account, migrants said.

The smugglers blend in with the hundreds of Afghans, Kurds and Eritreans huddled in makeshift camps around Calais and other northern French ports facing England, even if they sleep in hotels and have an air of confidence with their more expensive clothes. Often, they are compatriots of the migrants, said a volunteer who works with migrants and insisted on anonymity.

The passage is rough: Britain says that it thwarted 18,000 illicit attempts to get to England last year. Truck drivers often take matters into their own hands, beating stowaways for damaging their loads.

Five years ago, the Red Cross camp of Sangatte, derided by Britain as a magnet for illegal immigration, was razed. This did little to deter those who follow the migration routes from Asia or the Horn of Africa in hope of a better future in Britain, drawn by the English language, the lack of national identity cards and the possibility of illegal work.

Sangatte opened in 1998 to deal with an influx of Kosovars. In the first year after it closed, in December 2002, there were 120 to 150 migrants in Calais at any one time, "and there were never any people from Africa," said Jean-Pierre Boutolle, a priest involved in local migrant issues for 10 years. "Now we have 400 migrants at any one time in Calais. Every week some leave and others come."

Boutolle, spokesman for the charity umbrella group C'Sur, estimates that about 80,000 people — both refugees and economic migrants — from 112 nations have passed through the Calais region since Sangatte's closure by Nicolas Sarkozy, interior minister at the time.

"The closure of Sangatte was a good thing because it was a sign of the political will of Nicolas Sarkozy to denounce the indignity of the center, and to tackle the problem of clandestine immigration," said Geoffrey Didier, a member of the cabinet of France's new immigration minister, adding that conditions there had been "unworthy of the French Republic."

Today's migrants, mostly men in their 20s and many minors, have paid too much and come too far to turn back at Calais, despite their precarious existence. They live in a forest of thorns known locally as "The Jungle," or in a derelict sawmill behind the Calais train station, or beside the Tintide chemical plant, or, until the police burned down their shelters 18 months ago, in the forest of Garenes.

Kurds, Afghans and Eritreans wait for a chance to leave, undeterred by the riot police or what migrants and volunteers say are regular assaults with tear gas.



Migrants gathered for a biweekly meal from Association Salam at Loon Plage. What the charities give, the police take away, often raiding and sacking their forest camps.

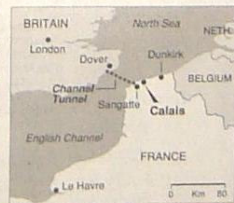
On a visit in early April, this reporter witnessed the police bringing Afghans out of "The Jungle," saw Eritreans at a police station, and felt the acrid sting of tear gas during a visit to the sawmill.

According to Nazanine Nozarian of the International Organization of Migration in Calais, which offers €2,000 to volunteers for repatriation, only 75 migrants agreed to go home last year. Calais, at the entrance to the tunnel under the English Channel, is not alone in dealing with migrants. On the western edge of the borderless Schengen zone, France is linked to Britain by nine ferry ports between Brittany and Belgium. Migrants seek shelter in makeshift camps near all of them, said Jean-Pierre Maselet, director of the local branch of Emmaüs, a nationwide foundation for the homeless.

With city, provincial and national government in France declining involvement, locals have stepped in. Under the gaze of 80 to 100 CRS riot police rotated through Calais every three weeks, according to Boutolle, they have fed hundreds of Afghans, Iraqis, Kurds, Iranians, Eritreans and Somalis every day for the past five years.

Bakers donate unsold pastries; high-school students serve Middle Eastern dishes prepared by women from the Maghreb; retirees drive 110 kilometers from Arras to peel 150 kilograms of potatoes every weekend. Médecins du Monde runs a clinic; a Catholic charity provides showers; a disused church has been transformed into a giant wardrobe.

"It shouldn't be up to charities to look after them," said Nan Suel, a worker at Secours Catholique, folding towels while migrants peeled off layers of



clothing to shower on premises pungent with sneakers and steam. "Regionally we close our eyes; France closes its eyes; internationally people close their eyes — it's only the CRS who react, with tear gas."

Near Dunkirk one recent Saturday, Damien Popieul, 26, delivered firewood to Kurds and Afghans camping in the dunes at a beach called Loon Plage. The migrants unloaded swiftly, hauling the wood to shelters made of plastic sheeting and packing crates. Last time, said Hardi, a 16-year-old Iraqi Kurd who hopes to study computing in England, the CRS followed, confiscating the lot. "After that there was snow all day," he said. "They knew the snow was coming."

In a country where housing and transporting undocumented migrants is a crime, punished by fines of about €7,000, the region's 300 active volunteers say they tread a fine line.

Negotiations with the police have established "calm zones" round a portacabin and under the Calais lighthouse where meals are distributed; in December, the charities succeeded in opening a hall for migrants to sleep in when temperatures plunged below zero. But they cannot stop the police from raiding or burning shelters, or driving migrants to the border police station for questioning before freeing them, sometimes without shoes.

"We are here for two reasons: for Vigi-pirate, and to deal with clandestine immigration," said one CRS officer, standing over an Afghan, shivering in wet socks, whom he had picked up in a dawn raid on "The Jungle" on a recent Sunday. Vigi-pirate is the security alert system France uses for terrorist threats.

Migrants wonder: If they are not wanted in France, why won't the French open the border and let them through? "They shoot us like Palestinians, but what have we done?" said Noh, a 23-year-old Eritrean in the yard of the sawmill, broken glass underfoot and tear gas in the air after the third police raid that day. "They should stop controlling in the port and let people go," said an Afghan at Loon Plage.

A request for a meeting with the head of the border police for this article was turned down, while Calais's new, conservative mayor, Natacha Bouchart, and subprefects in Calais and Dunkirk, all declined interviews.

In the meantime, an uneasy truce prevails. Migrants are usually issued an expulsion order, but often cannot be deported because of cost, lack of re-admission agreements with their countries, or because they face persecution there.

Yet some are taking no chances. Standing round a fire in the sawmill as melt from a late spring snow dripped through the roof, one 22-year-old fleeing open-ended military service in Eritrea drew a glowing metal rod from the embers, and slowly seared his fingertips off.

"It doesn't hurt," he said, displaying hands yellow with scar tissue. Others, also hoping to dodge the European fingerprint database, use razorblades.

Mariam Rachil, in her office at Secours Catholique, dismisses British press criticism that the charities' recent proposal to open a day center for migrants amounted to a second Sangatte that would encourage more clandestine arrivals.

"Look at La Ceuta and Melilla — there are no charities there and migrants are still coming," she said, referring to the Spanish enclaves in northern Morocco where Africans try to enter Europe. "You want to know how to resolve the problem of Calais?" she added. "Take away the port."

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Multimedia: Audio commentary from Caroline Brothers, with photographs by Susan Meiselas.