

From Cairo to Calais: a trip to the refugee camp at the dark heart of Europe

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Monica Ibrahim is an MSc student at LSE with a focus on media, gender and development. She has worked previously as a communications specialist for several civil society entities in Egypt. She has also worked a journalist for multiple outlets including GlobalPost, CBC TV Channel in Cairo and Scripps Howard in Washington DC. Follow her on Twitter [@monica_ibrahime](https://twitter.com/monica_ibrahime)



I found myself spending the 5th anniversary of the Egyptian revolution in a refugee camp in the French port city Calais. I thought I would be writing about the humanitarian situation in Calais, the problem is, there is nothing “humanitarian” about the living conditions I have seen in the camp. The only humanitarian aspect of this story might be how volunteers work hand in hand with the people who live in the camp to make sure that everyone survives this wasteland that around 6000 people currently call “home”.



Most of the improvised shelters in the camp are surrounded by mud and waste from almost all directions



Annie, volunteer at the camp says "Calais is not a refugee camp; it is a camp full of refugees." This photo was taken inside "Jungle Books" the camp's library

The journey to the camp began in the back of a van in total darkness, crammed in with strangers, my body pushing against the cold interior of the vehicle. This is the kind of ride your mother would warn you against. The silent darkness is broken by a ringing phone, a young female British voice answers, quickly sounding agitated with a "no way, this is outrageous." After an extremely bumpy ride, I arrived to what the media and the residents of the camp refer to as the "jungle." As soon as I get out of the van, I had to drag my feet through what seemed to be an endless pond of mud and other semi-solid substances.

Soon I discovered what Annie (whom I later found out was a volunteer at the camp), was upset about while talking on the phone. I saw a crowd gathering in front of huge bulldozers tearing down some of the shelters near the main highway of the city that represents one of the camps' borders. Annie said the camp has received an eviction order from French authorities to remove 100 meters of shelters contouring the camp. The crowd seemed to be particularly upset about the demolishing of a young boy's shelter in front of his own eyes.

This scene was the crowd of the camp's residents among the ruins of some shelters on one side while on the other side stood police, riot vans, bulldozers and the media. As a journalist, it was an eerie feeling to have the camera looking at me as a subject for the first time. It was also very obvious to me where the media has positioned itself by selecting an angle to report from the "authority's" side interpolating the audience to adopt a certain view point.



Main sorting area at the warehouse of Help Refugees and L'auberge des migrants international in Calais. Both initiatives work on providing basic means of living to people at the camp where aid of major international organizations don't reach

The small group of volunteers I was with then moved to "Kabul Café" a cozy refugee-run café that serves home cooked meals ranging from fried eggs to gravy meat. I was impressed with the brilliant use of very limited resources to create such a lovely and home-like ambience. "This place has a soul," said Maya, a 60 year old French volunteer who currently resides in the camp. When I first met Maya, she was cheerfully talking about getting money from her jewelry she has sold to be able to buy urgent things for the camp.



Maya, French volunteer who resides at the camp says "this place has a soul"

Residents of this camp don't have the luxury of calling themselves "refugees," the lack of such status deprives them from accessing humanitarian aid provided by major international agencies. Or as Annie says, "Calais is not a refugee camp; it is a camp full of refugees." I believe you don't need an academic definition to recognize human suffering, especially one that is looking for refuge from war-torn countries. That's why I will refer to people in Calais as 'refugees' even if the international organizations wouldn't.

Walking around the camp in Calais listening to all the stories and ordeals of how people got trapped here was one of the most difficult tasks I have ever had to do. I met two Syrian men who jokingly commented on my Arabic accent

saying that they missed watching Egyptian soap operas. “Although war has been going on in Syria for almost 5 years now, I have never slept in a tent,” said one of the men. He then added, “it is only when I came to the greatest country in the world that I have been living in a tent for months, lit only by a candle at night.”

As we walked further in the camp, I met an Afghani refugee who spoke fluent English with a posh British accent. I was later told that he had worked as a translator with the British forces in Afghanistan but now lives at the camp trying to get an asylum in the UK. He also runs a Facebook page for the refugees in the camp, an attempt to provide a platform on which they can have their voices heard.

It is interesting what you can learn about the region you have lived in your whole life in one day in a refugee camp in Northern France. I talked to a man who identified himself as “Bedoon” that literally means “without” in Arabic. I learnt that Bedoon is an ethnicity that is collectively unrecognized by most Arab states leaving the group of almost 100,000 basically “stateless.” The man told me he is seeking asylum in the UK to be reunited with his daughter who lives in London. He was later joking with one of the volunteers, Annie, telling her she looks exactly like his daughter that he showed us a photo of. The thing is, Annie didn’t look at all like the photo this man showed us but I know how it feels to see the people you love and miss the most in everyone you meet.

Later, our small group moved to a place inside the camp called “jungle books,” a small library that has a couple of hundred of English, Arabic, French and Urdu books. Those books were neatly organized, labelled and categorized ranging from novels to dictionaries and encyclopedias. Mary, a volunteer, sits at her computer helping refugees who visit the library find the books they need. I was approached by two Sudanese refugees who spoke Arabic to help them find a dictionary they need for a language class run by volunteers. I was impressed by the fact that everyone in this camp was striving not only to survive but to develop and grow, which made Maya’s words about the “sense of community in the camp” more clear to me.



‘Jungle Books’ is the Camps’s library along with a kids area. Volunteers work hand in hand with refugees to alleviate the deteriorating living conditions of the camp

[Help Refugees](#) and [L'auberge des migrants international](#) are two of the main volunteering initiatives that work in the camp where major international aid organizations can't operate. Their warehouse in Calais is an effective sorting and organizing system for donated items to be sent to the camp. Hettie, head of operations and logistics at the warehouse told me that they are now going through a crisis as the donations have sharply decreased. "Our shelves are now almost empty, we had a high season of donations during Christmas but now it had really decreased," she said.



A group of Syrian refugees who fled a war-torn country are walking across the muddy road that runs through the camp

Reflecting on this experience as a student, I would say the camp was like a big classroom and I was attending an

intensive course where history meets international relations and politics meet development. I also experienced a first-hand account of how the Global South meets and collides with the Global North and truly puts to test values of human rights and dignity upon which democracies claim to thrive. I think it will take me years to fully digest and understand what I have seen in the camp, but there is one thing I know for sure, I can't unsee what I have seen.

[@monica_ibrahime](#)

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