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Refugees welcome?

After the closure of the Calais migrant camp, French charities call for more state help with accommodation

Since the destruction of the informal settlement of refugees and transitional migrants in Calais – now known as the "Jungle", in October 2016, the French government promised to find housing for all three to four-thousand people forced to leave the area. They have opened about 500 welcome centres to redistribute the fleeing population across the country, away from Calais, neighbouring Hauts-de-France and saturated Paris. Meanwhile, the Mayor of Paris has opened two buildings to host a capacity of 500 refugees waiting to be registered for asylum. But they are already full and refugees are still arriving, notably via the Italian border. Those working with refugees on the ground say the system has the capacity to absorb people in need, but only with political will and a proper infrastructure.

Following the closure of the Calais infamous "Jungle", in October 2016, one thing that Parisians have not been able to ignore is the increasing number of refugees from Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea and Afghanistan living on the streets. They're mainly young men who have survived a very long journey to find almost no help. They congregate in areas that have regularly been the nerve points of the crisis in Paris: Boulevard de Stalingrad, Halle Pajol, Boulevard de la Chapelle, and along the North and East stations. Authorities estimate more than 50 foreign migrants arrive in Paris each day, and that more than 400 are living on the streets of the French capital. Most of them would qualify for asylum, as they have been fleeing war and devastation.

Pushing all refugees out of Calais has inevitably drawn some of them back to Paris, young men hoping to travel on to England, despite British efforts to keep them out and last year's referendum on the U.K.'s withdrawal from the European Union.

France already has the infrastructure to

house refugees

For Bruno Morel, executive director at Emmaüs Solidarité, a non-profit organisation charged with coordinating the settlement of migrants in the capital, “Paris and France in general have the capacity to host and settle every incoming refugee. And a lot has been done so far, but we should not weaken our efforts”.

Since June 2015, the police in Paris have organised 30 evacuations of informal settlements around Place Stalingrad, in the 18th arrondissement. But thanks mainly to non-profit organisation, 23,000 offers for temporary accommodation have been found and opened for the homeless refugees in France since the beginning of the crisis in 2015.

On May 31, 2016, Mayor of Paris Anne Hidalgo officially opened a temporary hosting structure and a humanitarian “camp”, with healthcare facilities, a kitchen and an information centre. It is meant as a first port of call, before a migrant is settled into more suitable housing. Set on Boulevard Ney, on the northern edge of the city, it has 400 beds and has hosted 6,800 people, in shifts, since November 2016. A women-only centre was opened soon after in Ivry, on Paris’ south side. Non-governmental organisations are looking after the refugees’ most basic needs, with Emmaüs Solidarité coordinating the site, helped by Médecins du Monde, Logique Habitat, and Doctors Without Borders (MSF), among others.

“We think everyone can be hosted in a proper camp”, adds Bruno Morel, “but we must stay organised and open new centres outside Paris and Calais, where the situation is getting saturated. We need fluidity. The government needs to open other centres in Strasbourg, Lyon or Marseille, and regularly check where there are free spaces”.

From the camp to the streets

But the situation remains harsh for refugees in Paris. A recent report by the Refugee Rights Data Project shows that hundreds of them are still sleeping on the streets in freezing conditions, and are regularly having their blankets and sleeping bags taken by police or are “violently” moved on. Natalie Stanton, deputy director of the Project, describes “alarming” scenes in the La Chapelle area, where authorities launch repetitive clearance operations. MSF published similar reports during the winter.

Meanwhile, in Calais, refugees are again settling near the entrance of the Eurotunnel, aiming to travel to the UK. But the local authorities are

refusing to open any more hosting centres. Mayor of Calais Natacha Bouchart, of centre-right party Les Républicains, has even forbidden the handing out of meals and snacks.

Her mayoral decree states the "regular, persistent and large presence of individuals distributing meals to migrants" in the area around the site of the former camp poses a threat to peace and security. It bans any "repeated, prolonged gatherings" in the area, making food distribution an offence. Most refugee charities have decided to ignore the ban and are taking legal advice.

Tensions are rising, especially as refugees continue to arrive at the Italian border, via Libya. Locals living between Ventimiglia in Italy, and Nice on the French Riviera, an area with a centuries-old tradition of migration, have often been welcoming. Not so the judicial system.

Unwelcome hospitality

In February, French farmer Cédric Herrou was handed a 3,000 Euro suspended fine for transporting three Eritreans across the French-Italian border. He has also housed dozens of migrants in caravans on his farm in the Roya valley, in south-east France.

"Forced eviction back to Italy is purely illegal," Herrou tells me during a sit-in to protest abusive police control in Sospel, near Ventimiglia. "The police are controlling every car on our road and every black person found on the streets or trains. We cannot let them keep doing this".

Herrou's verdict comes less than three months before the first round of France's presidential elections, and many parties are using the issue of immigration to galvanise voters. But volunteers across France in support of the refugees are still out in force.

On 6 March, in a speech on the future of the European Union and the coming elections, French President François Hollande said the EU had to speed up its decision-making process, especially when it comes to the refugee crisis. But the interior minister, Bruno Leroux, already admitted a week before that it would be "difficult" to find shelter for all migrants. However, without a deal with the United Kingdom, French authorities will have no other choice that to act and open more accommodation for the homeless refugees, in transit or not.



Melissa Chemam

Paris

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