

Calais October 2025

I'm just back from Calais.

What I saw defies easy description: a situation painfully real and heartbreakingly dystopian. A situation that reveals both the best of human resilience and the worst of human neglect. Unaccompanied children (the youngest I spoke to was fourteen) - Sudanese, Iranian, Palestinian, Afghani - and families with young children surviving in open, squalid conditions just 35 minutes on the channel tunnel from Folkestone.

France's post-"Jungle" migration policy (for more on The Jungle see [here](#)) is known as zéro fixation and is designed to prevent migrants from settling. Officials say it disrupts smugglers. In reality, it means people live in forests, under bridges, in derelict buildings, anywhere slightly hidden. The living conditions are appalling. Multiple people and families sharing small tents in often muddy, dirty locations and with no facilities. Their tents are regularly torn down by the authorities and replaced again and again by the small organisations and volunteers in Calais who have very limited resources.

Most people's journeys have been horrific. Many I spoke to had travelled for months and been tortured along the way. Police brutality was so evident in the scars, limps and faces of those I met. One young man from Iran told me that after being captured by police on his journey across Europe, his hands and feet were tied together and he was thrown into a river, left to drown. A local farmer saved his life.



I've not been in a space where so many people – in fact, everyone there – had experienced so much trauma. One 17-year-old from Sudan told me: *"I play football really well! One day I will play for Liverpool. But my head it too full; I cannot play football now. I must survive."* This boy spoke of his mother back in Sudan; his father was killed by the soldiers. He was one of maybe 400 young Sudanese boys at the distribution site that day. Did they imagine they'd end up here?



Water tanks maintained by volunteers: for drinking, washing etc



My colleague Tina and I, from [Bradford City of Sanctuary](#), joined [Focus4Hope](#) on the trip to Calais. We'd collected donations – tents, roll mats, tarps - from so many generous people and companies. Some dentists were part of our group too, offering much-needed dental care to people living in the camps. There is always something for a volunteer to do in Calais – from chopping vegetables to support the thousands of meals distributed by [Refugee Community Kitchen](#), to supporting [Care4Calais](#) in their warehouse sorting and organising hundreds of donations.



On Saturday, we went to one of the camps (distribution sites) to support the different activities - people can fix bikes, get a haircut, charge phones, play games, receive first aid, or simply have a hot drink. Care4Calais also distribute an essential item - on Saturday it was base layers. They only give something out when there's enough for everyone. It is well-organised and has to be. The distribution sites felt like a place where both kindness and potential chaos coexist; when desperation is so great and with the looming threat of the police, there can be a fragile calm as tension bubbles beneath the surface. That said, when the giant speakers were brought out, hip-hop worked its magic and there was a lot of dancing!



Bike fixing station

That day, I spoke to a 24-year-old Sudanese man waiting in the long line for dental treatment. He told me he'd just been finishing his degree in 2023 when the civil war broke out. *"I lost everything,"* he said quietly. *"My mother, father, brother, and two sisters."* If you don't know about the devastating crisis in Sudan, look [here](#). That young man was waiting, along with hundreds of other boys and young men, for his 'chance' to cross to the UK (often at a cost of between £1,000 and £2,000). Another 17-year-old boy told me he had tried to cross last week. It was his tenth attempt but the police intercepted the boat before it even made it into the sea.



Phone charging station

The next day, we went to another distribution site in the centre of Calais. As we arrived into a car park by a canal it looked like no one was there. But it didn't take long before people starting emerging out of nowhere - from tents hidden behind piles of building rubble or under bridges. A small boy, maybe six, ran straight to the hot drink van run by Care4Calais. Wearing a Paw Patrol hat, two old coats, and trainers that, in my house, would be destined for the bin, he ran back to his father who was standing nearby with three other young children. I spoke to the father: *"We just want to go to the UK and live a peaceful life,"* he told me in impeccable English. Nearby, their few possessions rested against a tree: a small tent, a buggy, and two bags. He was clearly an educated man and he seemed ashamed. How undignified it must feel to be in such a situation.

The uncomfortable power dynamic stays with you: people who were once respected professionals, forced to flee their countries because of war and persecution, now finding themselves the recipients of charity: dependent, displaced, and desperate. I couldn't stop wondering how he would get his four children onto a small inflatable boat in the dead of night to cross the Channel. The thought chills me to the core.

When you meet the people behind the numbers and the headlines, you realise how absurd our national debate has become. The crisis isn't the boats - it's the absence of safe routes, the brutality at the borders, and the erosion of empathy. Over time, migrants have been rebranded from victims of crisis into an "invasive force" of criminals and predators. The loudest assumption is that most are "economic migrants." Yet everyone I spoke to had left their country due to an ongoing genocide, brutal militia, air strikes, torture, and death. A really helpful article in The New Stateman points out - *"the 'economic migrant' label ignores the simple truth that a person can be both in need of work and fleeing for their life. Safety and prosperity are not mutually exclusive."*

What persists in Calais is murky chaos - failed government policy and human desperation. The real question is not why people keep coming, but how, in a country like France, such misery is allowed to continue at all. It's impossible not to feel the weight of privilege. I can't escape the unease of knowing that chance - the simple lottery of birth - has placed me on this side of the divide. That awareness brings both guilt and responsibility: we can't turn away. The question now is what can be done.

(See the next page for a few ideas)



Camp life

What the headlines won't tell you...

- Less than 5% of all migration to the UK is by small boat.
- 1 in 6 people making those journeys is a child.
- Refugees make up just 0.7% of the UK population.

Source: [Safe Passage](#)



Thank you to everyone who donated for this trip! Here they are at the Care4Calais warehouse before being sorted below...



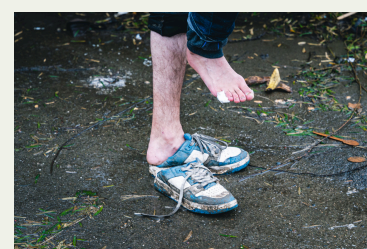
Queuing for clothes



Dental work (a volunteer dentist bought an old ambulance and converted it!)



Our Focus4Hope team at RCK!



Further resources...

- For anyone asking why migrants don't claim asylum in the first "safe" country they reach or why they choose the UK, I'd encourage you to read [the New Statesman](#) article.
- [Calais: The End of the Jungle](#) (film)
- [On the frontline of the small boat crisis](#) (ITV news)

How to help:

- Get involved with [Care4Calais](#): volunteer your time in their warehouse, collect goods and donations, raise funds.
- Volunteer your time with [Refugee Community Kitchen](#) (or fundraise).
- Volunteer/fundraise for [Kaleidoscope](#) who work with displaced teenagers in Calais.
- Volunteer with [Project Play](#) (if you have experience of working with children).