

France: Growing desperation amongst Sangatte refugees

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Reports from the Sangatte refugee camp near the Eurotunnel freight terminal, on the French end of the Channel Tunnel, point to growing desperation amongst those trapped there and seeking to enter Britain.

On Aug 30, 44 people, mostly young men, were caught by security guards, after they had managed to walk seven miles along the Channel Tunnel from the Coquelles terminal. The tunnel is 37 miles long, with no lighting and only a three-foot wide walkway separating pedestrians from the freight and Eurostar trains. The group were detected by heat sensors.

On August 31, 80 people were prevented from entering the tunnel and on September 1, another 100 were caught at Coquelles.

Every night hundreds of refugees, many with children, walk the two miles from Sangatte and attempt to scale the razor-wired fence surrounding Coquelles in the hope of leaping onto a slowing freight train. Refugees have tried to stop or slow down the trains by laying on the tracks. The vast majority are caught by the ever more stringent security at Coquelles, and bussed or forced to walk back to Sangatte.

The refugees' efforts to reach Britain are becoming increasingly frantic due to a combination of factors—the degenerating conditions within the camp at Sangatte, the tightening security at Coquelles and the possibility of the camp being closed by the French government at the behest of the British.

The camp consists of a disused warehouse and some portakabins. Opened to refugees hoping to enter Britain in 1999, the Red Cross-run camp initially catered for a few hundred people at a time, most of whom would leave within a week. Now, with some estimates of the population as high as 1,650, refugees spend weeks living in cramped, cold, conditions while attempting to secure a dangerous perch on a train to the UK.

Smugglers continually cream off the last resources of mainly Afghan, Kurdish and Iraqi refugees who have spent many months and all their savings journeying, by a myriad of dangerous means, across Europe in the hope of finding a decent future for themselves and their families.

Echoing the Australian government's response to the 436 refugees on the Norwegian vessel *MV Tampa*, the British and French governments and opposition parties have denied any responsibility for the refugees and utilised the TV pictures of desperate men, women and children scrambling down motorway embankments and over fences to justify their already vicious anti-asylum seeker policies.

Tensions between Britain and France have escalated, with both sides blaming each other for not being brutal enough in their treatment of refugees. In line with their practice of ignoring the refugees provided they continue to try to get into Britain, the French government are reported to be considering opening another refugee centre, either in a disused psychiatric hospital, 20 miles from Dunkirk, or in various locations around North East France, while stalling on British demands for Sangatte to be closed.

Britain's Home Secretary David Blunkett has made it known he wants Sangatte closed. A Home Office spokesman stated, "The United Kingdom Government believes that the location of the Sangatte camp, while ultimately a matter for the French authorities, is not helping the situation at Coquelles." Talks with the French Interior Minister, Daniel Vaillant, have been arranged. France's Socialist Party government responded to Blunkett's complaints by suggesting that Blair tighten up Britain's asylum policies so no-one would want to go there.

The Labour government is being egged on by the

Conservative Party, whose immigration spokeswoman Anne Widdecombe has called for detention camps to be introduced for all asylum seekers and more rapid deportations.

The British media has joined in the portrayal of a few thousand desperate people as the greatest threat to Britain's way of life in modern times. The most vociferous anti-immigrant rhetoric has come from the papers of Rupert Murdoch, which have likened refugees to an invading army. In a September 1 editorial, the *Times* of London warned that "events [at Sangatte] unfold against a backdrop of public opinion, deeply and dangerously concerned about what seems an unstoppable flow of those who will stop at nothing to achieve their ends." Refugees efforts at Sangatte were becoming, "trespass with menace" and were imperilling British French relations. "Not for the first time, [Calais] has become a cause of quarrel between France and Britain. If order cannot be restored to Sangatte, more than the most ambitious Anglo-French joint business enterprise would be in jeopardy."

The tabloid *Sun* raved on September 4, "Britain is now under siege from thousands of desperate refugees". Supporting Blunkett's drive to close Sangatte, it concluded, "...a more effective solution would be for Britain to stop all automatic handouts to refugees. If this wasn't the land of milk and honey, they wouldn't want to come here."

The ostensibly liberal press, the *Guardian* and the *Independent*, has lined up squarely behind calls for punitive action to prevent asylum seekers entering Britain. They have concentrated on calls for trans-European measures to stop so-called "asylum shopping"—the elimination of marginal differences in immigration and asylum policies which offer migrants more chances of entering this or that country. A *Guardian* editorial of September 3 complained that the French government was not arresting asylum seekers expelled from Sangatte and opined, "There is only one way to stop France turning a blind eye to illegal refugees and that is a common European approach. European Union member states in the Schengen group do have a common policy but the UK, Ireland and Denmark opted out." The *Independent* suggested, September 3, that ex-Labour Home Secretary Jack Straw's proposal to rewrite the 1951 Geneva Convention dealing with the treatment of refugees

should be taken up. Straw proposed defining "safe" countries near the areas around the world that were generating the most refugees. Asylum applications from these "safe" countries would automatically be rejected. No leader writer has questioned the morality of treating as pariahs those whose only crime is to seek physical safety and economic security, let alone the government's claim that the resources do not exist to meet such basic human requirements.



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