

Britain and France seek tougher measures against refugees

Richard Tyler
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On Wednesday, the British Home Secretary met with his French counterpart and agreed to seek tougher measures throughout the European Union (EU) to deal with asylum seekers.

In a joint statement, British Home Secretary David Blunkett and French Interior Minister Daniel Valliant called for swifter “progress to agree and implement common EU procedures for dealing with asylum seekers” aimed at inhibiting “asylum shopping”.

The meeting had been arranged amidst growing Anglo-French antagonisms about the Sangatte reception centre, close to the Coquelles depot at the entrance to the Channel Tunnel. Run by the Red Cross, the Sangatte camp was opened in 1999 to provide shelter for refugees and asylum seekers in the Calais area. Although originally meant only to house around 400, the camp, in a former warehouse, is now home for some 1,600 refugees.

Over the summer, the refugee camp has been the subject of a cross-Channel media war, with the British press accusing the government of Lionel Jospin of closing its eyes to the situation at Sangatte, and of “French laxity”.

Tabloids such as the *Sun*, *Mail* and *Express*, have served up an almost constant fare of articles attacking those housed at the Sangatte camp for trying to make their way to Britain and claim asylum. The banner headlines complained that Britain was a “soft touch” and an “easy target,” or that the country was “under siege” and the government must “stop the invasion”.

Rupert Murdoch’s *Sun* newspaper combined its anti-immigrant diatribes with a large dose of anti-Gallic invective, saying that London should be firmer with the French, who should find a solution to what is “their problem, not ours”.

In response, an unattributed comment from Valliant’s

office blamed Britain for being too lax in clamping down on the democratic right to asylum. The French government said, “it is not Sangatte that attracts refugees, but British legislation on the right to asylum”. The French foreign ministry at the Quay d’Orsay called for Britain to “reflect on everything that may reduce the differences between legislation and practices of the UK, on the one hand, and the European Union, on the other, differences which make Britain particularly attractive to all candidates for immigration.”

In the run up to his meeting with Valliant, Blunkett had asked France to shut the Sangatte centre. Although this was not agreed, the joint statement did say, “France confirms that there is no intention to open a second reception centre for those attempting to enter the UK illegally.” Earlier in September, Employment Minister Elisabeth Guigou had raised the possibility of opening new reception centres to relieve the overcrowded conditions at Sangatte. This was immediately blocked by Valiant, who called it “inappropriate”.

The British government’s attempt to have the Sangatte camp closed down was paralleled by a case in the French courts by Eurotunnel, which also sought closure of the refugee facility. However, on Tuesday, the administrative court in Lille rejected an application for a summary judgement that would close down Sangatte. The case is aimed at overturning a prefectoral decree in 1999 allowing the facility to open.

Claire Duval, the lawyer representing the Prefecture, told the court, Sangatte was not a “three star hotel for illegal immigrants” but a shelter for refugees. If the camp were closed, the refugees would simply return to camping out in the parks and public squares of nearby Calais.

The full case will be heard later this year.

Both the British and French government are seeking

to exploit the plight of the refugees presently housed in the overcrowded conditions of Sangatte to push for tougher immigration measures throughout Europe. The French argue that if Britain tightened up its asylum procedures, already some of the harshest in the EU, then the migrants would not come to Sangatte to try and make their way to the UK.

As well as the “juxtaposed controls” that already exist, whereby British immigration officials scrutinise all those seeking to use the Eurostar service in France, to prevent potential asylum seekers making the journey to Britain, Blunkett and Valliant agreed to further beef up the policing of the tunnel.

The many Kurds, Afghans and others that are housed in Sangatte have undertaken long and often dangerous journeys to reach Europe, some paying their entire life savings of thousands of dollars to traffickers. They are fleeing persecution, civil wars and grinding deprivation. In their attempts to reach the UK many are prepared to risk further dangers. Five people have already died trying to reach Britain via the Eurotunnel depot at Coquelles near Calais. The latest was a young Iraqi man, run down by a vehicle at the beginning of the month.

For London and Paris, those at Sangatte are regarded as essentially “economic” migrants with no justified claim for asylum, either in France or Britain.



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