

# France: Closure of Sangatte camp intensifies attack on asylum-seekers

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On November 5, the Red Cross refugee centre in Sangatte, near Calais in northern France, was closed to new arrivals. The sudden decision, made without forewarning and 10 days before the official date set for the camp's closure, was guaranteed to create a humanitarian crisis.

The camp is to be completely closed and all its current 1,600 occupants dispersed by April 2003. For three years the disused warehouse, the size of five football pitches, had been used to accommodate some 6,000 refugees who wish to seek asylum in Britain rather than France.

Before the camp was opened, large numbers of immigrants had been forced to sleep rough in and around Calais. Even whilst Sangatte was open, it had never been able to accommodate the tens of thousands of refugees fleeing desperate poverty, war, political instability and repression from across the world. In 2001 alone, over 80,000 arrests had been made in the vicinity of the Channel Tunnel and its rail link, and a further 7,000 people removed to the border. More than 10 refugees have died attempting to make the crossing to Britain, clinging to trains or hiding in lorries.

The decision to shut the camp by the right-wing Gaullist minister of the Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy, means a drastic worsening even on the situation prior to 1999.

The Calais administration is run by a Plural Left coalition headed by the French Communist Party (PCF) and PCF Mayor Jacky Hénin. All have cooperated, despite certain mutual recriminations and differences of approach, in imposing the ever harsher anti-immigrant regulations being set up in France and throughout Fortress Europe.

Mayor Hénin had estimated that some 500 new arrivals had been left without shelter in the Calais area

since they were barred from access to the refugee camp. Most of these are from war-ravaged Kurdish Iraq or Afghanistan.

On November 7 the Comité de soutien d'urgence aux réfugiés (C SUR—Committee of emergency aid for the refugees) had sought to come to the aid of the displaced refugees. C SUR—which incorporates the anti-globalisation organisation Attac, the Greens, Gisti (Groupe d'information et de soutien aux immigrés/Group for Information and Support to Immigrants), local churches and the Opal Coast Youth Economic Chamber—had assembled 44 migrants, mostly Iraqi Kurds, in a Calais municipal gymnasium.

According to *Le Monde*, Hénin arrived two hours later. Accompanied by councillors of the municipal majority—PCF, Socialist Party (SP), Left Republican Movement (MRG) and Alternative Greens—his visit was intended to “take cognisance of ‘this initiative decided on without its knowledge and of which it [the council] disapproves’.” Hénin criticised Sarkozy's closure of the Sangatte centre “as a media gesture.”

He agreed to give aid to the community volunteers, but on November 8 the refugees occupied another gymnasium, from which they were evicted on Hénin's orders.

That day Hénin called a joint meeting of the elected representatives and the community groups of the region where, *Le Monde* reported November 11, he had “violently reproached” C SUR for “obliging the municipality to bear the consequences of a unilateral decision by the state”. By the end of the meeting a deal had been struck. The left would accept the closure of the Sangatte centre, and the mayor would open the small St-Pierre-St-Paul church, closed for the removal of asbestos, to refugees until November 12.

Hénin was said to be delighted at the outcome,

especially after the préfet of Pas-de-Calais department, the government's local officer, Cyril Shott, offered to transport the refugees to centres far from Calais.

The stage was set for the left and community groups to force the refugees to give up an attempt to get into Britain. Michel Dauvergne, spokesperson for the community groups, said, "Until then (November 12) we will set up information units, ethnic group by ethnic group, to explain to the migrants that British legislation has changed and that it is now in their interest to stay in France."

The pressurising of immigrants to abandon their fight for asylum in England is in line with the deal struck between the British and French governments. The camp had been the centre of a tussle between Britain's Labour government and the then Socialist Party government.

Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair had demanded Sangatte's closure, accusing French authorities of knowingly allowing and even encouraging refugees to try and escape the camp to make their way to the UK. In response, the Jospin government had accused Britain of being too "soft" on asylum.

The row over Sangatte became a pretext for beefing up anti-immigrant measures across the European Union. In Britain, the government is to push through a range of measures, including detaining refugees in special hostels and imposing further restrictions on the right to asylum.

But France's political parties, both left and right, are not satisfied that Britain has gone far enough. *Libération* reported November 13 that Sarkozy, Hénin and others had met and agreed to send a joint delegation to London in early December. According to Jack Lang, SP deputy of Boulogne-sur-Mer, its objective is "To explain to our English friends that they must be clearer and firmer and make better known the new legislation passed in Great Britain." Albert Falcon, Plural Left deputy for Pas-de-Calais, was said to have remarked that "old Sarko ...[was] doing what we should have done." Jacky Hénin, in his interview in the PCF daily *Humanité*, railed against Sarkozy's decision "to shut the Sangatte centre without the problem being sorted out in Great Britain."

Back at St-Pierre-St-Paul church, the various groups set about persuading the refugees to leave Calais. The refugees from Iraq (officially designated an "unsafe"

country) were told to apply for asylum to the Commissions d'accès aux documents administratifs/Commissions of access to administrative documents, a process taking up to 18 months, during which time they would not be forcibly repatriated or expelled.

For the minority of Afghans, however, there was only the offer of a five-day stay at a Centre d'hébergement et de réinsertion sociale/Centre of lodging and social reinsertion, whilst they decided what to do.

The refugees had sought to sit it out, but on November 11 the police refused supplies into the church and three days later, following a request by Hénin for police assistance, the 120 were forcibly evicted. Nobody had spoken up for their right to chose asylum in Britain, lest it establish a precedent for would-be refugees to France.



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