

Fire hits Grande-Synthe refugee camp in France

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On Monday night, a fire in the Linière refugee camp in Grande-Synthe on the northern coast of France destroyed more than 75 percent of the camp's 300 wooden shed dwellings. The camp was the last one remaining to house refugees trying to reach Britain from France.

The camp was built for 700 people but housed over 1,500 at the time of the fire. The main population in the camp were Kurds from Iraq. However, six months ago, a large number of Afghan refugees arrived because the French government destroyed the main camp built by the refugees, 25 miles away at Calais, housing some 3,000 refugees. Those refugees that agreed to go to "Centers of Reception and Orientation" (CAO) were dispersed throughout France; many who refused walked the 25 miles to the Linière camp.

The arrival of the Afghan refugees brought the camp's population to 1,500, but no new cabins were built, and many of the new arrivals had to sleep in common areas—kitchens, dining rooms, etc. Under such crowded and unsanitary conditions, conflicts inside the camp erupted. People in the huts slept five or six in huts of seven square meters.

The origin of the fire that destroyed the camp still has not been fully investigated and remains unclear. Authorities and the press have claimed that the fire was started during a knife fight between Afghans and Kurds, in which four people were injured. Paramilitary riot police arrived and fired volleys of tear-gas canisters into the camp.

Though there were also eight firemen present that night, little seems to have been done to stop the fire's spread. Ten people were injured in the blaze, and reportedly only 70 of the 300 huts survived.

Two gymnasiums in the town of Grande-Synthe were opened during the night to provide temporary sleeping

quarters for the refugees. However, only between 500 and 1,000 places have been taken. Between one and two thirds of the refugees are apparently sleeping rough in the countryside and villages surrounding the remains of the camp.

At a press conference the next morning, French government officials made clear that they did not intend to seriously investigate the fire or repair the damage. Rather, the Socialist Party (PS) government, having already destroyed the Calais refugee camp as part of its campaign to crack down on immigrants, is seizing on this fire to justify shutting down the other major refugee camp in northern France, as it has been trying to do for some time.

In mid-March, before the fire, then-PS Interior Minister Bruno Le Roux called for the dismantling of the Linière camp "as rapidly as possible".

On Tuesday, the new minister of the interior, Mathias Fekl, came to Grande-Synthe and stated bluntly: "There will be no reconstruction of the camp here. We have to find more appropriate solutions."

Appearing at the Grande-Synthe camp after the fire, Police Prefect Michel Lalande said, "What I have been able to see myself is that everything has been burned, but it is impossible to go around the whole camp and establish a clear idea of the extent of the damage." Nonetheless, even before surveying the damage, he asserted, "It will be impossible to rebuild the wooden huts on the same space as before."

Lalande's partial tour of the camp did not allow him to definitely establish the cause of the fire, and he declared with studied indifference: "No one can explain how these events could have happened."

Local authorities said the fire was intentional, as it started in many places at once, and that the refugees probably started it during the knife fight. If this was the

case, it only underscores the essential responsibility of the PS, as it housed the refugees in miserable conditions.

French officials are already busy at work trying to find a false, “humanitarian” justification for shutting down the camp. Nearly a year ago, then- PS Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve declared: “It is not the role of the state to maintain such camps, which have a lower humanitarian standard than the CAOs”.

Cazeneuve’s attempt to hold up the CAOs as positive examples of France’s treatment of refugees to justify crushing other refugee camps is a political fraud. Such centers are few and far between in France, in any case, and are often shunned by refugees.

Behind the French government’s drive to dismantle the Linière camp is the agreement reached by the British and French governments to stop immigration to Britain from France. In the Le Touquet agreement of 2003, the two governments agreed to move British border controls to Calais and Dunkirk and Paris in France, so that refugees and other immigrants could be refused entry to Britain before even boarding a boat or getting on the Eurostar train.

When the agreement was confirmed last August, and Britain agreed to help finance France’s operations, the *Guardian* commented: “A joint statement issued by the home secretary, Amber Rudd, and her French counterpart, Bernard Cazeneuve, says they will work together to strengthen security around the ‘shared border’ in Calais and ‘strongly diminish’ the migratory pressures that have attracted 7,000 migrants to the Channel tunnel port.”

Within a couple of months “The Jungle” camp near Calais had been dismantled, and now the police are in turn attacking the Linière camp at Grande-Synthe.



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