On the edge of an ambivalent Europe

Correspondents

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May Ngo writes from Calais, where irregular migrants continue to take their chances on finding a way into Britain

Above: Sudanese migrants warm themselves over a fire in the “Sudanese Jungle” at Calais.
Photo: Thierry Tronnel/Corbis

AMIR took a box of matches from his pocket and placed it on the table in front of him. He lit a match and held it to one of his fingers. Then he lit the next match, and burnt the next finger. He did not talk, but grimaced as he applied the flame to each finger. In the dim light inside the squat, I could see he was in pain; he stopped to take a break before forcing himself to start again. It was a surreal scene: the makeshift fire in the corner of the squat, the unrelenting wind coming through the exposed walls, the sleeping bags laid out among the debris – this was not something I expected to see, not in France. When I asked one of the other volunteers what Amir was doing, they told me that he was destroying his fingerprints to try to escape detection.

We were in the Palestinian Camp in Calais, where I have been working as a volunteer cooking food for “irregular” – or undocumented – migrants trying to cross from France into the United Kingdom. Although it was called the Palestinian Camp, it was made up of Egyptians, Iraqis and other Arab speakers. All of them were living in an abandoned lace factory exposed to the elements, with half of the outside walls missing. Debris lay scattered over the factory floor.

Calais is a port town in the department of Pas-de-Calais overlooking the Strait of Dover. It is at the narrowest point – thirty-four kilometres wide – of the English Channel. The town relies on lace-making, chemicals and paper manufacturing industries, and on the port. It is also known for its gigantic shopping complex, Cité Europe.

But irregular migrants in Calais don’t work in the lace factories, and they don’t shop at Cité Europe. They prefer not to be seen and would, in fact, rather not be in Calais at all; it is merely a necessary stopover on the way to Britain.

Irregular migrants have made up part of the population of Calais since the mid 1980s. Many of them give economic or family reasons for wanting to get to Britain, and sometimes it’s an amalgam of both, with the migrant’s family members or contacts across the Channel owning businesses that can offer them work. Shahram Khosravi, an Iranian researcher who was once himself an irregular migrant, explains that having such a network is crucial because it provides a certain amount of security and self-confidence in what is a very precarious situation. “Beside economic support, the network meant access to information and to having a clear and defined prospect of the journey,” he wrote in an article published in 2008. “The choice of country of destination was primarily determined by such networks.” Some have also mentioned language as a reason for choosing Britain as their destination—they speak English but not French – while other migrants have been told by contacts in Britain that it is easier to claim asylum and find a job there.

The number of irregular migrants in and around the town increased dramatically in 1999 with the arrival of hundreds of Kosovan refugees. In a warehouse formerly used for tunnel construction and with funding from the French government, the Red Cross opened the Sangatte refugee camp, officially a “centre for humanitarian emergency accommodation and reception.” The centre was to be a temporary shelter for refugees until they were dealt with by the administration, usually either via an application for asylum in France or a voluntary return to their homeland. But those at Sangatte did not want to stay in France or return home. Instead, they tried to
cross the Channel as stowaways in trucks or on trains.

The growing population of Sangatte centre was controversial, with Britain and France blaming each other for not doing enough to enforce the border and for lax asylum rules that allowed undocumented migrants to enter. For Britain, the existence of the centre demonstrated that France was a “soft touch” for irregular migrants. In 2002, after pressure from his British counterpart, Nicolas Sarkozy, who was interior minister at the time, closed the centre, claiming it had become a magnet for undocumented migrants. Since the closure, large numbers of refugees arrive from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Africa, with local charities estimating a total number in the thousands.

During my time in Calais I was a volunteer with one of those charities, Salam, which distributes cooked food each day and visits migrants in their camps. The other volunteers at Salam were mostly the concerned locals who had founded the charity to fill the gap in services after Sangatte was closed.

Irregular migrants now stay in a number of squats in and around Calais, including the Palestinian Camp, the Sudanese Jungle, Africa House, the Pashtun Jungle, and the Hazara Jungle. As the names suggest, migrants have grouped themselves along language and cultural lines. A squat is called a jungle if it is completely uncovered, a camp if it’s semi-covered (in a derelict building, for example) – or a house if it’s in an intact structure.

On my first night in Calais, the other volunteers and I visited the Sudanese Jungle. We drove to a nearby sportsfield, parked our cars, crossed the road and walked along the canal. We kept walking in the dark until we reached a group of people sitting around a campfire, their figures dimly lit. Despite the conditions they were living in, these migrants were the friendliest I’d meet, joking with us and offering endless cups of tea.

IN 2002, responding to the increased numbers of irregular migrants, the European Union set up the Eurodac database to store the fingerprints of all asylum seekers and irregular migrants found in the European Union, and details of their location when first detected. All member countries can access the database. Since 2003, under the European Union’s Dublin Regulation, irregular migrants have been required to lodge their asylum claim in the first EU country they reach. If their asylum claim is rejected in that country then they must return to their country of origin. This naturally has implications for many migrants in Calais, who want to get to Britain rather than seek asylum in the first EU country they had entered – which was why Amir in the Palestinian camp was trying to destroy his fingerprints. Many other migrants would have entered Europe through Malta, Italy or Greece, all countries where it is notoriously difficult to gain asylum.

Even if migrants want to stay in France rather than go to Britain they have little chance of being successful in their claim if their fingerprints are already registered on the Eurodac database in another EU country. The Dublin Regulation does contain a clause that allows EU members to consider an asylum claim where a migrant has already passed through another EU country, but according to Marie Martin, who recently completed a thesis at the University of Sussex on the situation in Calais, there is “a clear reluctance to use this clause.”

Another man I met at the food distribution, Ali from Afghanistan, was one of many affected by the Dublin Regulation. His fingerprints were taken three years ago when he arrived in Italy from Afghanistan. Because it was his country of entry, he had to apply for asylum in Italy, and he has lived there now for three years. But he is dissatisfied with his life. What he earns in Italy is barely enough to live on, he said, and he was hoping to go to work in Britain for a few years – illegally, because he was not eligible for a British work permit. One of his sisters already lives in England.

The European Union is currently re-examining the Dublin Regulation. Critics claim that it has not succeeded in preventing irregular migrants from moving once inside Europe, and is also costly and inhumane. The Council of Europe’s human rights commissioner, Thomas Hammarberg, said last month that a revamp of the Dublin Regulation is needed because countries such as Greece and Malta are unable to provide adequate protection because of the sheer numbers of asylum seekers arriving at their borders. As a leading scholar on Europe, Eiko Thielemann, has pointed out, migrants’ historical and cultural ties to their chosen destination will override any attempts to prevent secondary movement. The situation in Calais illustrates this very clearly.
The Dublin Regulation is part of the European Union’s efforts to control spontaneous movement into its territories as well as to prevent secondary movement once irregular migrants are inside. The European Union has been working to create a Common European Asylum System, a coordinated approach to managing the flow of people, but the process has been stalled for more than a decade and 2012 is the new target date for its implementation. Carl Levy, a political scientist at London’s Goldsmiths College, points to an ambivalence not only in the method but also in the common goals of EU asylum policy: “The internal asylum and refugee regime of the EU is still a process marked by conflicting restrictionist and liberal tendencies and is left in a limbo of intentional ambiguity.”

According to Levy, this “intentional ambiguity” results in a mixed bag of policies and practices, which migrants must navigate in their attempt to reach their destination. Levy notes a contradictory “division of labour,” with supranational institutions such as the European Commission advancing a human rights approach while individual member state governments push for greater migration control through such mechanisms as integrated border management and rapid border intervention teams and through the work of the EU border protection coordinating agency, Frontex.

All the migrants I talked to shared the same desire for a better life, which they mostly saw as synonymous with being able to earn more money in Britain. Some migrants I met would be deemed “economic migrants” – they wanted to go to Britain for work and either came from a country in which no conflict was occurring or had already been granted asylum in another European country. But, as Levy notes, the distinction between economic migrants and refugees is sometimes not so clear; although they may initially leave their home country because of fear of persecution, many migrants undertake journeys that can take years to complete, thereby becoming economic migrants over time.

IN CALAIS, the Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité, or CRS, are charged with policing migrants. The CRS are the general reserve forces of the French National Police, and perform riot control duties. They are well known for being used in demonstrations as crowd control and for their excessive use of force.

In my time in Calais, I saw the CRS continually harassing migrants by raiding their squats, sometimes up to four times a day. Towards the end of my stay, the CRS were raiding the Sudaneese jungle many times a day. In theory, these raids catch undocumented migrants, who are then served papers saying they must leave France within twenty-four hours. In reality, the migrants simply return to Calais and wait for another opportunity to cross. The CRS’s strategy is one of continual harassment so that migrants will finally leave Calais of their own accord, and at their own expense.

The CRS’s main weapon is unpredictability. The migrants can never be sure if or when they would be raided, and once captured, what will happen to them. The consequences vary: being detained for twenty minutes before being let go, being arrested and detained in the local police station overnight, or being taken to the detention centre in Coquelles, one of the centres de rétention administrative where irregular migrants are held. If they were detained in Coquelles, they have a two-hour walk back to Calais after they’re released. Migrants whose only crime is irregularity cannot be detained for more than forty-eight hours and so the cycle of arrest and release continues.

The CRS’s actions during a raid are also unpredictable: sometimes they used tear gas or put pepper spray in the water or took away the blankets and food. Once, they appeared to have given the dogs laxatives so they would defecate all over the squat. This tactic of extreme, calculated harassment is essentially designed as psychological warfare to break down migrants. While I was in Calais the psychological warfare took a cruel turn – it was Ramadan and many migrants were fasting. The CRS started raiding squats in the evening, just before migrants would break their fast for the day. Those caught by the CRS would usually be taken to the police station overnight, thereby having to miss out on food that day.

Some of the unpredictability might have resulted from the fact that CRS personnel were changed every three weeks. Apparently, it is part of the “tour of duty” for all new CRS recruits to spend three weeks in Calais. This means that Calais receives a constant turnover of CRS recruits who are usually keen to prove themselves and their force. At the same time, the turnover prevents the CRS personnel from forming any kind of permanent relationship with the migrants, and might also account for the uneven treatment of migrants by the CRS. While
there were numerous accounts of physical force and abuse by the CRS in Calais, I was also witness to a “good cop” answering questions politely. And at the end of Ramadan, in response to the migrants’ request on the Muslim holy day, the CRS released those they had arrested so they could pray at a mosque just outside Calais.

The unpredictability and harassment had a real effect on some of the migrants I met, with many becoming depressed and despairing about their situation as the intensity of the raids increased. The cycle of raids, arrests, detention and checking of papers seemed to be working to get migrants moving out of Calais. Volunteers told me that a couple of years ago there were nearly a thousand migrants coming to the food distribution point every night; now there were only about a hundred and fifty. It is hard to determine the reason for this. Do fewer people want to go to England, or have people become more successful in their crossing, or is the CRS harassment having an effect? It is also hard to determine where migrants have gone –if they have travelled to the nearby city of Dunkerque or elsewhere close by, or if they have really returned to their country of origin.

ON MY last night in Calais, I visited the Palestinian camp once more. There was a fire burning in a corner of the squat, where a man sat alone. He told me his name was Ahmed and he asked me where I was from. Australia, I told him. Ahmed laughed and said that’s where he was from as well. I thought he was joking until he pulled out his passport and by the light of the fire I could see the emu and kangaroo on the cover. I was dumbfounded. I asked him what he was doing here, and told me his story.

Ahmed had lived in Adelaide with his wife, after migrating there from Morocco. He became an Australian citizen, but had then separated from his wife. His only other relatives were his three brothers and their families, all of whom lived in England. “I was lonely, I didn’t want to be in Australia anymore,” he said. One of his brothers owned a business in England and he guaranteed a job would be waiting, so Ahmed decided to go to England to try out life in a new country and be closer to his family.

At Heathrow airport, with his Australian passport, he was stopped and questioned about the intentions for his stay in Britain. He told the immigration officials that he had come to visit his brothers for a holiday. They didn’t believe him and brought his brother, who was waiting for him at the airport, in for questioning. Unfortunately his brother mentioned that Ahmed wanted to see how life was in England, and that he might stay if he liked it here. The immigration officials took this as evidence that Ahmed was lying, and refused him entry into Britain – despite the fact that he was entitled as an Australian passport holder to enter Britain without a visa and stay for up to three months as a “tourist.” This is how most Australians enter Britain, but not for Ahmed, who looked different and whose name was different from a typical white Australian’s. As he said, “I can never escape my background.”

This refusal repeated itself when Ahmed tried to enter Britain again via Ireland, France and then Germany. Each time his legal entry was refused on the basis that it had been refused the first time. His passport details and the entry refusal were registered on a database, which came up every time officials scanned his passport. He applied for a new passport in the hope that the previous refusals would not show up, but border agents were suspicious of his having obtained a new passport before the old one had expired, and he was refused entry on that basis. Having spent much money (thousands of dollars flying to and from Europe) and time (nearly two years), he decided his only way to get to Britain was illegally via Calais.

When I met him, he had already tried to cross the Channel via a truck and had been caught, held overnight by the police and released. This time, he told me, he had decided to go via another route just outside Calais. It was more dangerous and in a more desolate area, and fewer people tried to cross this way – thereby increasing the possibility of success, since it was under less surveillance. I met him the night before his attempt to cross. I asked him if he was afraid. “Yes,” he replied, “but I would rather die than not make it.”

I wonder if Ahmed made it. I hope that he is now with his brothers in England and not back in the former lace factory that is the Palestinian camp in Calais.