

Thoughts from the 'Jungle' - the refugee camp in Calais.

The first thing that strikes you is the mix of faces, the smiles that greet you, the ease of making connections. Humanity is here, in the mud, in the dunes, in the despair, in the hope and in abundance. You are at once in France and yet not in France; the huge mix of nationalities - Iranian, Sudanese, Afghanistan, Iraqi, Syrian, Palestinian, Eritrean- have their own 'zones' but as more people arrive these defined spaces become more blurred as pitch for a tent or a tarpaulin shelter is at a premium. The imprint of national identity on French soil shapes how camp space is demarcated and known; the Eritrean Church, the Afghan restaurants; you talk about where you are going in camp and people say 'To Eritrea' or 'I'm in Sudan, I'll be 5 minutes'. Surreal space.

The reasons why people are there; heartless inhuman immigration laws that separate families, religious persecution that prevents people returning to their homeland because they have changed religion to Christian from Islam and will be killed if they return, people that cannot return to their own countries and are deported from others, denied asylum in others. A 21 year old sent to make a life so that his Mother and 2 surviving siblings can join him from Syria, his Father and brother killed by terrorists. People lost and in limbo. The only way for people to get to the UK is to jump the 2 enormous barbed wire fences (kindly funded by Mr. Cameron) and then jump onto the moving freight trains to get through the tunnel. People die every night doing this. In the camp you see people with bandaged hands and ankles... injuries from trying to climb the fences. But of course there are thousands of people who cannot even attempt this, families, children, older men, Grandmothers.

Conditions are appalling. I spent 4 days putting tents up for and with people who just arrived (many people have never seen or put up a tent before). People are overjoyed with a tent- it is instantly called home. The site is split over sand dunes and an old rubbish site, it is neither flat nor clean. There is human excrement everywhere- not because these people are dirty. They are proud people, the few water points are always abuzz with people washing and cleaning. But because there has been an utter lack of appropriate sanitation provision, the French state has just been ordered by the Courts to provide more toilets.

There are churches, restaurants, shops, a barbers, bars, an extraordinary Nigerian guy building a school. All from wooden pallets, blankets as insulation and strong tarpaulin around the outside. Tents are squashed together- there is no adherence to Sphere humanitarian guidelines that dictate how close tents should be (for fire reasons), as more people arrive, available tent space is under severe competition. The French government say there are 3000 people here- in reality there are 6-7000 and the number grows every day. An army of astonishing Volunteers facilitate daily distributions and provision of food, shelter, clothes, sleeping bags, support, care, guidance - the French state will not invite any NGO's in, maybe because then they have to admit there is a problem. Those who know more than me say they expect at least 10,000 people by Christmas, 15,000 by March.

The camp is at once a bottomless pool of hope and love and a dark pit of gut wrenching heartache and loss. Loss of identity, homeland, belonging, place. Hope for the chance of a safe and secure future. I cried with a Kurdish Mum, worried about her sick child and with a beautiful Persian man separated from his daughter for 6 years. I laughed with

astonishingly brave, gentle Iranian men who have tried to jump the fence 8 times. I shared tea with Afghani men who welcomed me, while I felt embarrassed for my English identity and the freedom it allows. Human connections are astounding, the best of humanity is everywhere, the worst of humanity created this situation. It is at once humbling, inspiring and devastating.

It is the most extraordinary place I have ever been.