

Tensions rise as migrants mass in Calais hoping to reach Britain

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Calais is a stopping point for many undocumented migrants: some are refugees from wars and repressive governments, others come to escape poverty. Many do both. Their nationalities vary. Right now, Eritreans and Sudanese are the largest groups. (...) Their aim is to cross the Channel by hiding in lorries that pass through the town's vast ferry port.

In response, the town's authorities attempt to discourage these travellers by making conditions harsh: the migrants are given no official shelter, while aid agencies like the Red Cross must locate their services out of town.

Yet if they were looking for a safe and prosperous place to live, then surely these migrants could find it in France; so why go through these extra hardships just to reach Britain?

In a cafe near the Hotel de Ville, I meet Samuel. (...) He could have claimed asylum in Italy, where he first landed, but decided to head for Britain because he thinks it will be easier to find a job there.

"I just want to work," Samuel tells me, "and as Eritreans we finish our education with English." (...) Like many other migrants I've spoken to in Calais over the past few months, Samuel has the impression that jobs are more plentiful in the UK, on the black market if nowhere else.

Because he faces punishment if he returns to Eritrea, Samuel has grounds to claim asylum in Europe. Yet he wants to avoid doing so until he reaches the UK: under the European Union's Dublin treaty, refugees must make their claim in the EU country in which they first set foot. Critics of the system say it puts an unfair burden on countries at the periphery of the 28-member bloc, such as Greece, Italy and Bulgaria, who are illequipped to deal with demand. Some refugees will try to travel across Europe undetected to avoid this trap; others will claim asylum at their point of entry and then, despite restrictions on their movement, do what hundreds of thousands of EU citizens do every year – migrate north and west in search of work. France itself is an unattractive option, because of long delays in the asylum process and a shortage of housing.

The crisis in Calais points to the dark side of the EU dream of free movement. In order to reassure citizens that their national borders remain secure, governments are taking ever-more restrictive measures to control and expel unwanted migrants.

Against this background, it is unlikely Britain will make any move to soften its own border controls. Charlie Elphicke, MP for Dover, says that the current treaty "ensures our borders are safe and secure", adding that since sniffer dogs were introduced, "hardly anyone breaks through". Elphicke is a member of the UK's governing Conservative Party, which has pledged drastically to reduce undocumented immigration. He stresses the need for "the UK and French Governments to work together to smash the human trafficking rings which are behind this problem".

Calais itself is split between those who simply want the migrants gone – last winter, there was a successful campaign to get locals anonymously to report squats in their neighbourhoods – and sympathisers who distribute clothes and hot meals.

Earlier this month, around 70 mainly Sudanese migrants gathered round in a circle to hear a visitor speak :

"Europe says it's democratic, so where is the democracy?" Ali, the speaker, asked, explaining that while EU citizens have the right to free movement, free expression and the freedom to sell their labour, migrants like themselves are treated like second-class citizens. His group has been touring Europe – Calais, Paris, Dijon, Marseille, Turin, Venice, Croatia – "to unite our struggles and to plan actions together".

(635 words)