

Tuesday - Warehouse and Dunkirk

The first day was Tuesday. Morning spent in the warehouse preparing packs of toiletries for 200-250 refugees. Went to Dunkirk in the afternoon after a debriefing. On arrival we were surrounded by the refugees eager to accept their parcels. We were there for approx. 2.5 hours. Although pouring rain, there was a carnival atmosphere, traditional music and canvas shelters that they had made up. Some of them making traditional food and selling it. This was produce which had been bought cheaply or donated.

A "barbers' shop" provided by Care for Calais - 3 portable chairs, 2 electric razors and numerous razor blades. This was real entertainment for us.

No five-minute trim here - eyebrows, beard etc cut with great care and skill, although there was only one barber among them with 17 years' experience but they all helped each other. It was like fancy needlework, ziz-zag, cross-stitch, you name it. Many smiles and great concentration.

Torrential rain did not dampen the spirits. However, there were many moments volunteers had to be strong, for example two brothers told us how they wanted to improve their life since their parents died in battle. They only had each other now and showed such closeness between them. Their eyes showed such emotion when they mentioned home (Pakistan). A couple came to our minibus just as we were about to leave, begging for us to take them. The 16-year-old boy recently out of hospital with "stomach pail's, very thin, very pale. I asked him what his diet was like and it consisted mainly of chips. He was just out of prison because he didn't have the correct documentation. Probably his hospital admission was the result of stress and poor diet.

It was heartbreaking to see these conditions where people spent their days and nights sleeping in soaking wet clothes in extremely wet conditions. Many had no cover, only the trees. A lake nearby was their main source of water. Many of these refugees wore lightweight clothing and summer sandals. One of them asked for shoes. He was wearing sandals but he needed something warmer for the winter. He was trying to preserve a pair of shoes he already had.

Wednesday – Calais

Wednesday, we went to Calais which was near the site of the old jungle. In the warehouse it was the same prep and debriefing. This time we were distributing joggers, all the same. No one was left out.

These refugees were mainly Sudanese, Somalian, Iranians and Iraqis and Eritreans. There would be approx 250 refugees, male and about 4 women. The majority of them from teenager to age roughly 40. They were very polite but much more

serious, with a great deal of sadness showing in their faces - not the happy carnival atmosphere we had experienced the day before.

These people living once again in the wolds near a main road - no lake or water nearby could be seen. This part of Calais was dismal. Everyone had many reasons to be serious, perhaps more so than other groups, but were more willing to share their experiences.

At or near site of the old jungle, many friendships were torn apart and families separated once again when it was destroyed. How could they look anything else but serious when a- A lovely 34-year-old Iranian man had taken years to reach Calais. He was desperate to be with his British wife who was in a London hospital following surgery for cancer. His phone had to be charged at all times as he awaited a call from traffickers. He had already paid f 3000 to them with the hope of reaching his sick wife in London.

b. The 16-year-old who had not spoken to his Gran for 6 months. He had no phone and he just wanted to let her know that he was out of Libya where refugees may be sold to traffickers if demands are not met. If they are caught, phones will be confiscated. They must pay about 6400 for the return of their phones or they may face further torture and could be sold to traffickers. That young boy was given a phone donated by Care for Calais and at last he would be able to contact his Gran. I cannot image the joyous response at his call,

Thursday – Brussels

Thursday was Brussels where we met about 350-400 refugees and distributed tracksuits. Their home was sleeping rough in a large public park. They were mainly Eritreans. Among this group were the same - fear, sadness and huge uncertainty about their future and that of their families left behind.

To leave them in such dire circumstances (for example trees giving shelter cut down, water supplies cut off and ground cultivated to discourage tents), was heart-wrenching. Conditions were bad in all places and capacity for disease high risk for instance the return perhaps of cholera, typhoid, TB etc.

Friday - St Amer,

Same preparations before leaving warehouse and clothes were then distributed. Visited a home which was in a huge old building. This was for unaccompanied minors, (mainly boys under 16 (about twenty-five and two girls), all mainly from Afghanistan. Immediately on entering the warm, caring atmosphere could be felt. They remain there until all paperwork is completed. One little boy was desperate to be reunited with his linear old brother. He last saw him when "The Jungle" was

destroyed. He was expressing his greatest wish of seeing his brother. He thought his brother was in Bristol but who knows whether that was correct. On completion of paperwork they are transferred to foster care.

A brother and sister, (12-year-old girl and her 17-year-old brother) had arrived the previous day - again from Afghanistan. They had made their way by walking and hiding in trains. Both lived in fear of being caught as they travelled. Almost all of the children were orphans and appeared really happy to meet us. We were greeted with big smiles. Most of them had their dreams: one wanted to be a welder, others a cricketer and an electrician. Of course, their greatest desire was to be reunited with their siblings and grandparents.

After a couple of hours with them you could not help but be amazed by their courage and resilience.

Given the opportunity their future could be bright.

As for everyone I met, I wish I could say a brighter future lies ahead, but the truth is their future still looks bleak until many more people are willing to help and be accepting of those they see as different. The bottom line is, without help, they will not survive. The continued work of supporting charities is vital, as is our support of these charities - whether it be our money or our time.