

**REFUGEE RIGHTS  
EUROPE**

**THE UNKNOWN KNOWNS**  
**OBSERVATIONS FROM SMALL INFORMAL REFUGEE  
CAMPS IN NORTHERN FRANCE**

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# INTRODUCTION

Unlike the larger informal refugee and migrant camps<sup>1</sup> in Calais and Dunkirk, the smaller camps that are located across northern France, mostly along the highways A25 and A26, have received much less media attention and are therefore largely understudied.

Besides a recently released report by UNICEF, there is no official data on these smaller camps<sup>2</sup>. This makes it difficult to understand the realities and living conditions that their residents face.

Moreover, the absence of reliable information about these settlements overshadows the extent of the humanitarian crisis unfolding in northern France, which goes beyond the camps of Calais and Dunkirk.

Refugee Rights Europe (RRE) decided to build on its previous study conducted in February 2016 in the Calais camp, by conducting field research in the wider region.

The research in the smaller camps seeks to shed light on the broader situation of informal settlement that expands beyond Calais and Dunkirk.

RRE found that although support from local communities was relatively common, living conditions resembled those in the Calais camp. Thus, the situation raises serious concerns about human rights infringements and unmet humanitarian standards<sup>3</sup>.



<sup>1</sup> This language is adapted from UNHCR's official terminology. Meanwhile, RRE officially uses 'refugees and displaced people' to describe the residents of these camps.

<sup>2</sup> UNICEF (2016) 'Neither safe nor sound. Unaccompanied children on the coastline of the English Channel and the North Sea.'

<sup>3</sup> Some of the camps have now been evicted or handed an eviction notice. Nonetheless, this report is valuable in pointing to the conditions that prevail in any small informal settlement that could come into existence at any point in time at any given location, particularly along the highways leading to Calais and Dunkirk.

# METHODOLOGY

With this data gap in mind and the aim to expand on the Calais camp study, four independent academic researchers conducted field research in June 2016.

They visited five small camps over the course of five days. Despite having known rough locations of the camps beforehand, the team had to spend time identifying their exact locations, which are kept very discrete.

Due to the secrecy and sensitivity of the camps, RRE decided to collect data through qualitative unstructured interviews and descriptive analysis.

Conducting quantitative research was not feasible, given the sensitive nature of the camps and the heightened importance of ensuring anonymity of the camp residents.

Once the camps had been located, the researchers spoke to refugees and displaced people as well as volunteers in unstructured conversational interview style. In addition, observation notes taken by the researchers were essential in informing the picture of the camps.

# LIMITATIONS

Due to time and scope constraints, as well as the sensitivity of the situation and importance of protecting the anonymity of residents, the RRE team faced some limitations.

The researchers spoke to at least two people in each camp in order to verify information. However, three major constraints can be acknowledged.

Firstly, there were limitations due to difficulties in the smaller camps to ensure the research team did not overstep their welcome in people's private sphere, as well as ensuring the preservation of anonymity. Secondly, precautions taken by the communities and cautious, self-protective attitudes limited the sample size, since the camps are – by virtue of their small size – significantly less anonymous than the larger ones. Thirdly, selection bias could not always be avoided due to the apparent stricter hierarchies prevailing in the smaller camps, so either community leaders or

more educated English-speakers spoke on behalf of the communities.

Despite these constraints, the researchers were able to gather information and observations on the living conditions in the small camps.

The scope of the research did not include uncovering the complex dynamics that may at times exist in informal settlements. Instead, the following overview seeks to raise awareness of the status of human rights and living conditions observed in the camps. To protect the privacy and anonymity of the residents the names and locations of the small camps have been anonymised.

*"Here we are all family."*

# CAMP #1

After driving for some time, the RRE team identified and reached the first camp to be observed.<sup>1</sup>

The camp which was referred to as the “jungle”, like the Calais camp, was located among fields and sheltered by a few trees. However, it also directly bordered a street and was thus highly visible.

Residents only seemed to sleep in the “jungle”, with daily life taking place in a facility in the nearest town centre. There, a French woman and a group of other helpers were working hard to provide daily support to the approximately 200 residents.

Countries of origin included Eritrea, Ethiopia and the Sudan. Although men formed the majority, there was also a considerable presence of women. Those with whom RRE spoke demonstrated high levels of education.

Occupations ranged from an environmental engineer to a humanitarian aid professional who had served in refugee camps in Africa.

The “jungle” consisted of a mix of tents and makeshift shelters constructed from wood and plastic. There were no sanitation facilities and no drinking water. Apart from these absences, the overall conditions mirrored those of the larger Calais camp.

However, residents could walk to the town centre, where they were usually able to access cooked food twice a day and basic medical care.

There was storage space for residents’ bags and belongings as well as a few beds for taking rest during the day. This was also where residents were able to hand-wash their clothes and access drinking water during the day. Hot showers were available once or twice a week.

A visible bond existed among the residents of this community. One resident specifically remarked that “*here we are all family*” in contrast to the Calais camp which has grown very large.

Nonetheless, residents face difficulties at times. Some residents reported experiencing citizen violence, including one who told us they had been deliberately run over by a car. Others reported being asked by police to kneel down and told to stay in that position for long periods of time without being arrested.

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<sup>1</sup> Shortly after the field research mission, this camp was dismantled by the French authorities, and its residents were evicted.

*"Rats and insects are everywhere."*





# CAMP #2

At the time of our research, about twenty Afghan residents lived in a trench between fields in another small camp.

The settlement could not be easily located from the main street. Wooden shelters with a plastic roof were well hidden behind trees and bushes. Only a garbage container next to the street hinted to the existence of a small, secluded refugee population. From this “base”, residents explained, they seek to reach the UK.


Residents told the researchers that “*rats and insects are everywhere*” and highlighted the substandard environment. Fortunately, a member of the local community visited them once a week and took injured or sick residents to the hospital. No sanitary facilities existed within the camp, but a local NGO regularly took the camp residents to showers in the nearby village. While they did have access to a water tank, hot water was lacking altogether.

The Afghans reported that no unaccompanied children lived in the camp. However, some accompanied children were present. During the period of the visit, a five year old boy lived there with his older brother.

According to the residents, no women lived in the camp. Neither the children nor any other residents received any form of formal or informal education.

In general, there seemed to be a relatively positive atmosphere. The residents shared the little food they were able to access, and had at least one communal space with a few donated chairs to sit on. With exception of the siblings, none of the camp residents knew each other before they came to the camp.

When asked why they did not relocate to the larger Calais camp, respondents stated that this camp had one striking advantage: here, they were not subjected to police brutality, despite describing the small camp as “*rather boring*” compared to the Calais camp. Furthermore, the camp residents claimed that they did not face any racism in the small camp. Nonetheless, living conditions are harsh, best summarised by one resident’s statement: “*Here nobody happy.*”

A photograph showing the interior of a tent. A red bag with black patterns and a blue jacket are hanging from a metal pole. The tent's fabric is white and blue. The ground is covered with green grass and some brown debris.

*“Whereas the female section was located on ground owned and provided by the local authorities, the male section sat mainly on private land.”*

# CAMP #3

## At the time of the research, this was the largest of the small camps studied.

It hosted 270 people in total – mostly of Sudanese or Eritrean origin, but a few inhabitants were Afghan. About half of this camp's population was Muslim, and the other half Orthodox Christian. Out of the 270 inhabitants in total, 100 were women. Three women were pregnant. Volunteers reported that some of the inhabitants had been fleeing their homes for a whole 12 years.

The camp could easily be located from the street. In a small wooded area, several individuals were lying on patio lounge chairs or leaning against trees. Several parked cars also gave a broad hint at the existence of a camp. The camp was divided into female and male sections, separated by a construction site. Whereas the female section was located on ground owned and provided by the local authorities, the male section sat mainly on private land. The space was owned by local farmers who, along with the mayor and the municipality, are engaged in a lawsuit aiming to evict the camp's residents from fields owned by local farmers.

RRE's researchers were met with critical questions and suspicion at the camp. Judging by several conversations, some inhabitants appeared to be highly educated. Researchers also noted a strong, hierarchical power structure which was highly visible: some leaders prohibited other residents from responding to researchers' questions. The team suspected that this atmosphere of fear stemmed from surveillance by police helicopters, amongst other factors. According to volunteers, these helicopters operated in the context of the ongoing lawsuit mentioned above. It was claimed that they enabled police to take aerial photos proving that private property rights were being infringed, and to assure that no new structures were built on privately owned fields. The fact that helicopters were used for this purpose shows that the municipality / mayor / other actors are willing to invest a lot of money to settle the issue in their interest.

Hygienic standards were very poor. Only one single toilet was available for 270 people.


Since officially only 75 people are allowed in the camp, French authorities provide water for only 75 people. The shortage was compensated by the consumption of rainwater. Men were taken to a soccer stadium near Calais to take showers once a week, while women showered on-site in the field.

Volunteers who operated in the camp worked for either *Medecins Sans Frontieres* (MSF), *Utopia 56*, or operated without institutional affiliation. The volunteers coordinated their efforts closely and generally seemed to be experienced. They were senior professionals who were knowledgeable in an area of expertise useful to the refugees and displaced people in the camp. For instance, researchers were

able to speak to an architect who helped build and furnish tents on the site. Another volunteer was cooking fresh vegetables in the camp and was assisted by (mostly female) refugees. This volunteer was experienced and took waste management into account when cooking. He did not leave any garbage behind and transported his biological waste off-site.

However, there was also a lot of uncoordinated aid. When the research team was on the ground, aid from first-time donors was distributed in a disorganised way, which could lead to potential security issues such as internal struggles over scarce resources. Meanwhile, certain goods were provided in abundance: researchers noted shelves with a total of 200 shoes that were neither demanded nor needed by the inhabitants.

The supply of tents was extremely limited. According to volunteers, an average of 21 people lived in a single tent. As a result, inhabitants were observed sleeping rough in the wood. Tents were generally constructed from plastic sheeting in order to improve living conditions. The professional architect reported that he considered building bunk beds in order to house more people in the tents. However, this would be an illegal action that could be prosecuted by authorities that monitor the sites with helicopters. Due to the missing sanitary facilities, a lack of waste management, and the fact that agricultural sites are nearby, there are many rats in the camp. A number of sources reported that an absence of waste management was a significant problem in the camp.



*"If you want to understand, you should live with us, because it changes all the time."*

# CAMP #4

Of all five camps, it proved most difficult to find the exact location of the fourth settlement studied.

Despite common acknowledgment of the existence of the refugee and migrant settlement among local communities, the most accurate description the researchers received was: *“they come in and out of the forest.”*

Indeed, the camp was placed deep in a forest on the outskirts of the town. Its only visible indication was a small paper sign with an arrow pointing to *“trai Việt Nam”*, hung high in between trees. The displaced people occupy a fenced-off piece of land provided by the mayor.

At the time of the scoping visit there were about 30 Vietnamese nationals in the camp: 20 men and 10 women. However, it is believed that there was a high turnover in number of the camp's residents, possibly hosting up to 100 people at certain times.

The average stay in the settlement was between one week and three months, potentially suggesting the presence of highly organised smuggling operations. The age of the individuals ranged approximately between 16 and 40, with the exception of one child aged just 14.

They occupied an old, desolated house, with some walls consisting of improvised plastic and metal structures. Despite the extremely dilapidated state of the building, there was very little garbage, and there was a water tank placed in the middle of the courtyard. The water, used mainly for cooking and laundry, was provided by the local authorities. Their representatives attend weekly meetings inside the camp to discuss the on-going issues, including medical emergencies.

Notwithstanding this indication of positive engagement of the local community, being kept physically segregated and invisible from the rest of the town systematically marginalises people in the camp. This prevents any significant interaction with the citizens of the town nearby, some of whom appear to be hostile to them. For instance, some citizens refused to provide the researchers with any information based on a false suspicion that there was a Vietnamese migrant amongst us.

Homogeneity of the population appeared to contribute to a sense of community – the residents of the camp spent time together, e.g. occasionally shopping for food items in the town, cooking and sharing meals, watching television or at a ‘gym’ equipped with a few exercise devices.

At the time of the research visit, the atmosphere seemed friendly, but we understood that this was prone to rapid change due to the rapid turnover of residents.

There was one English speaker in the settlement, whose words emphasised the impact of high turnover in the camp: *“If you want to understand, you should live with us, because it changes all the time.”*

The migratory route of the residents in this camp was very long, reportedly including Eastern European countries, and involving instances of human trafficking, abduction and exploitation.

*“Why am I here sleeping outside? If mama,  
papa would know where I sleep...”*



# CAMP #5

The last camp researched was located on tall, white cliffs forming a coastline of northern France.

It was in proximity of a highway and a ferry port. However, placed far from other elements of the town's infrastructure and high above the sea level, its location remained largely unnoticed by uninformed passers-by.

At the time of the researchers' visit, the camp was a temporary home to 20 Albanians and one Kosovar.

The visit took place after a forced mass eviction from the camp, which had previously hosted around 100 men.

There were no women in the settlement. There were however unaccompanied minors, including a boy of 17 years of age. Among reasons for leaving their countries of origin, the residents listed: a lack of education and self-development opportunities, oppressive mafia structures and widespread corruption amongst political elites.

The temporary settlement formerly consisted of 17 'umbrella' tents provided by the United Kingdom - each hosting approximately 20 men. Among growing dissatisfaction of the local authorities, 12 tents were removed by the French police during a recent eviction. Prior to the police intervention, the camp had a separate area used as a kitchen. Currently, however, it has no running water, no electricity and is cluttered with garbage. Two young people

expressed their helplessness in the face of such dire conditions with the words: "*Have everything in Albania, have house, have car*" and "*I have everything at home, why am I here sleeping outside? If mama, papa would know where I sleep...*"

Despite the dire conditions of the camp, the residents wanted to resist the eviction and preserve this small land as their temporary settlement. This was embodied by a thick line on the ground and the slogan "*King of Albania*", painted in a blue spray paint to indicate where the territory of the camp begins.

Even though there appeared to be two local cafes in which the camp residents felt fairly comfortable, they often experienced racist remarks and general hostility from the local community.

It was reported that residents were not allowed to stay in local hotels, even when offering to pay the full price.

They were particularly anxious and unsettled when talking about the French police, explaining that a few residents of the camp had been deported. One of them said he was longing for Germany which he had left behind, noting that "*Mamma Merkel*" would not have allowed for such levels of police brutality as he had witnessed here.

# CONCLUSION

## A number of key findings emerged from the research.

1. The small camps are generally neglected by aid organisations due to a lack of media attention, and most rely instead on the support of individuals.
2. Due to their smaller size, there is less infrastructure compared to the Calais camp and more people are crowded into a relatively small space.
3. There is evidence for higher volatility and turnover as residents generally stay for shorter time periods than in the Calais camp, where the average time period spent amounts to six months, according to RRE's findings.
4. Residents feel less threatened by the police as there is no exposure to tear gas. This can be compared to 75.9% of respondents who said they have experienced police violence in the Calais camp, according to RRE's findings.
5. Partly due to greater ethnic homogeneity, the camps appear to have fewer conflicts.
6. Since these camps are less populated, residents may become easier targets for citizen violence and targeted right-wing attacks.

Despite the support that was provided in some of the camps, living conditions remain – like in Calais – below UN humanitarian standards.

The research and observations demonstrated that a large number of residents in the small camps struggle to find basic human rights as laid out by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is universal and applies to all individuals, refugees and displaced people included.

With these findings, RRE hopes to complement its report on the Calais camp, informing public discourse and encouraging policy makers to work towards long-term solutions to the humanitarian crisis – whether unfolding in large settlements such as the Calais camp or in smaller less visible settings.





*A large number of residents in the small camps struggle to find basic human rights as laid out by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.*

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