

Day-to-day life in the Jungle is oddly ritualised

PAOLA TOTARO
IN CALAIS, FRANCE



It is 10am in the French port town of Calais and a deep blue sky is punctuated by perfect, cartoonish clouds. Seagulls wheel and cry in the wind as a fleet of multi-storey ferries strain and clang against their chains.

You can almost see England on the horizon from here, the place where the channel between the British Isles and Europe is at its narrowest. An imagined land of green, rolling hills, a paradise where children go to school, and housing, work and food are plentiful.

Just a few kilometres away on the town's outskirts, along the narrow, rubbish-strewn paths of the godforsaken refugee encampment known as the Jungle, two young boys on bikes — one of which is pink and sized for a toddler girl — whisk past at speed.

Like puppies, their limbs seem too big for their bodies, let alone the tiny bikes. Curious, smiling broadly, they weave nimble figure eights around us and finally come to a skidding stop. "Speak English? French? Italian?" we ask.

"Parlo Italiano! Io Ethiopia," announces the bigger of the two boys with pride. And so, nine-year-old Awal tells his story, of mum still at home in Ethiopia, the long, hot journey to the coast of Libya with dad, a boat trip to Italy.

"Dove è papa? Where is dad?" we ask him. "In Italia! Io solo," he says without a smidgen of self-pity.

Awal says he learned Italian "playing with the children" and it's clear from his accent that he's spent time in Italy's south, suggesting arrival from Africa via boat over the notorious stretch of Mediterranean between Tripoli and the rocky island of Lampedusa. He seemed to say that he'd come to France by train and then a car with "other people", somewhere on the border that stretches 515km in the southeast of France and northwest of Italy.

"Io vado England!" he exclaims pointing over the sand hills as his friend, increasingly agitated, begins to speak angrily in his ear.

What's he saying we ask?

"Non te preoccupa, quell'è scemo! England. Io vado!" ("Don't you worry, he's just a dumb! England, I go!") he says dismissively in a perfect vernacular.

More than 200 children living alone like Awal have risked life and limb to get to England this month alone. Perched atop trucks, secreted beneath tankers, climbing razor fences to breach security and walk the length of the Eurotunnel in pitch black, they arrive at the other end exhausted, terrified — and yet full of hope.

At present, 630 unaccompanied under-18s are in the care of Kent County Council, the large coastal English borough that encompasses the Eurotunnel entry and exit.

Peter Oakford, cabinet member for special children's services in Kent, says the pressure of the past few weeks has been "extraordinary".

"The total number of asylum-seeking children we have at the moment is 630 but one has to put that in perspective: we had 100 arrive in June and we had another 200 arrive in July, so that is more than double what we had back in May," he says.

"Every one of these young people needs accommodation, whether it's a foster-care placement or in supported accommodation, and we have run out... there's not a single place left and we're in the unprecedented position of having to place these children outside of Kent."

The council has now resorted to sending social workers long distances via taxis to support the kids each day: "That's not good for our workers or the children," Oakford says, "but we will continue to do this, to help these children until, somehow, we can see the tide is stemmed."

Inside the Jungle, Awal appears to be one of only a handful of kids, most of them playing soccer in the dust or whizzing about on ancient bikes. Most residents, estimated fluidly at between 1500 and 3000, are young, fit and able-bodied men.

At a bank of outdoor taps installed in the past couple of months by the French government, groups of men and women congregate, chatting and washing clothes, scrubbing runners and even baseball hats in a lather of suds.

Toilets, in the main dug or provided by charities, are few and far between.

And yet everywhere, too, are visible signs of the universal human desire to maintain ritual and routine, even in the throes of desperate day-by-day survival. Shaggy overused toothbrushes

Europe's human logjam



Above, 12-year-old Awal; below right, asylum-seekers wash outside a makeshift church; below left, Sikander at his restaurant; bottom right, fence-climbers; bottom left, Mengs

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voices but plastic sheeting and tents flapping in the coastal breezes. Eritrean, Afghan, Sudanese and Ethiopian groups have segregated themselves organically, creating mini "suburbs" in a microcosm of national borders.

"It is easier to live here, with other people like me who know what we have seen," Hadi, an Afghan man, tells me in perfect English.

Hadi says he left his home 14 years ago, seeking work through Italy and France, Germany and Scandinavia, always buoyed by the hope he would be granted asylum somewhere, anywhere. He has been in Calais two months: "I've lived outside the big city in France: you go crazy in one week there. Better here to wait and hope you can go there," he says pointing towards the sea.

Nearby, fellow Afghans Elham Sharif and Ismail Sharif nail scrap pieces of wood together into a tiny house-shaped frame.

They arrived one month ago after an arduous journey through Iran, Turkey, Bulgaria, Serbia and Hungary, partly by bus, much on foot. Ismail, unable to speak English, keeps his arm tucked under his armpit, attempting to hide the raw stump where his hand used to be.

Elham sees our questioning look and says "Taliban" before whipping out his papers proudly to show they are seeking asylum in France.

Despite many asylum-seekers sleeping rough in the camp while they wait to be processed, the French government does not provide garbage collection services and the detritus of human consumption is everywhere: plastic bottles, broken sandals, wrappers, rags, burned tyres, nets of donated potatoes drying in the sun.

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and toothpaste tubes squeezed dry are tucked neatly into the flaps of tents; queues to fill water bottles are orderly and amiable; young people wash faces and hair, scrubbing behind ears and under nails in the sunshine.

On a rickety chair, one young man uses an old-fashioned razor blade to give his friend's wild mop of hair a tidy-up. Outside another tent, a boy scrubs his trainers so hard that they're almost invisible in a cloud of soap suds.

High up on a hill, three young men hammer blankets around a wooden frame, filling gaps with cardboard and plastic and proudly cutting a door with a Stanley knife at the end of their toil.

One sports strapping around his ankle, a muscle tear sustained "trying the tunnel" by climbing a security fence to the Eurotunnel the night before.

Another young man, Mengs, 23, sits nearby alone on a concrete block, his leg encased in plaster from ankle to knee. In the four weeks since he arrived at Calais via Lampedusa from Sudan, he has tried to go over the fences three

times. "Now I have to wait," he says, forlornly looking at his leg.

In the Afghan "neighbourhood", a small generator pumping diesel fumes is surrounded by a tangle of black phone charge wires. There, young Sudanese sit with Eritreans, Afghans with Ethiopians, all of them mesmerised by the screens of ubiquitous (if old-fashioned and clunky) mobile phones.

This is just one pocket of the camp where the spirit and enterprising nature of asylum-seeking residents is striking. Nearby, in a sturdy wooden hut painted gaily with blue flowers and "New life, new world" in handwritten letters, Sikander, Mustafa and Haju, all from Afghanistan, chop chicken, cook vegetables and serve cups of fragrant black tea.

The smell of frying onion, spices and oil fills the air as Sikander stirs a giant pot while explaining that he left Kabul in 2003 and eked a living in Norway, Italy and France while applying and being rejected for asylum five times before the Italians finally gave him a work permit.

"But there is no work in Italy. It is too hard to get a job so I came back here," he explains, saying that he and his two colleagues can feed anywhere between 50 and 100 people a day.

Despite the newly opened, Anglo-French funded Jules Ferry Centre nearby, which provides one meal a day for Jungle residents (and showers and shelter for up to 50 women a night), Sikander says he is never short of customers.

'There are dogs, fences, the police ... they spray'

ASYLUM-SEEKER AHMED

Volunteers from local charities help him buy cheap produce in Calais and if they can't bring it back in a car for preparation, Jungle residents wheel supermarket trolleys laden with chicken and vegetables back to the camp along the roadside.

"Cooking is my hobby. Cooking is my work. In my day, I am

lucky: I do eight hours of work and eight hours of my hobby" he says. How do people pay, we ask.

A shrug of the shoulders. A refugee camp has existed on the periphery of Calais since the Red Cross-run refugee camp in nearby Sangatte was closed down in 2002.

At the time, research by a French sociologist Smain Laacher found that asylum-seekers — mostly Iraqi Kurds and Tajiks or Pashtuns from Afghanistan — wanted to go to Britain rather than stay in France due to the more favourable asylum regime.

Laacher's research suggests the majority were well-educated and had saved the equivalent of several years' wages to pay for their dangerous journeys, sparking political concern that the camp was being used as a base for illegal immigration.

In the years that followed, coupled with new security measures at the Calais port and the Eurotunnel terminal at Frethun, official numbers of asylum-seekers crossing the channel illegally were reported to have dropped from more than

10,000 in 2002 to 1500 in 2006. However, as conflict in the Horn of Africa heightened and with the eruption of the Arab Spring, migrants desperate for peace and a better life began to return, pitching tents, building rickety shelters and settling in once again to try their luck reaching England.

By September 2009, the shantytown had earned the moniker "le Jungle" and French riot police once again moved in, this time bulldozing the lot and arresting the residents.

Today, in its third or fourth incarnation on the dunes, surrounded by brutal swaths of elevated concrete motorways and with a backdrop of belching smokestacks from a nearby factory, Calais's state-sanctioned refugee slum has once again become a lure for the hope of new life across the strait.

Despite deterrents including 23km of chain-link fences topped with razor wire around the Eurotunnel opening, last month alone nine men lost their lives trying to reach England either clinging to trains, run over by trucks on the highway or drowning in waters near the tunnel entrance.

Last year, there were 15 such deaths in Calais.

The surge in attempts to reach Britain, say British officials, originated with a strike by French ferry drivers who brought the port to a standstill early last month, inadvertently creating new smuggling opportunities.

British Home Secretary Theresa May told parliament two weeks ago that between June 21 and July 11, police had stopped more than 8000 attempts to breach the channel and overnight on July 28, French police had battled an en masse surge of about 2000 attempts to scale fences, walk the Eurotunnel tracks and stow away on trucks.

Last Tuesday, despite a quieter weekend, our Eurostar to Calais was delayed by more than half an hour after asylum-seekers once again were detected in the tunnel and had to be removed.

Over the past few months, the

French medical charity Medecins du Monde has provided hundreds of sleeping bags and tents to deal with the surge in arrivals.

Volunteer doctors also run clinics in the encampment and this week, queues of young men waited to be treated for strains, cuts and bruises and broken limbs sustained in their attempts to cross the channel.

Inquirer spoke to one young boy, a Sudanese who didn't want to be identified even by his first name, who was confined to a wheelchair, both ankles smashed and in plaster.

Workers from charities such as Secours Catholique and Salam, which was established in 2002 to fill the gap in services when Sangatte was closed, are also present daily, handing out bread and plastic bags of fresh food from vans that on arrival are swiftly surrounded by long queues of hungry young men.

Ahmed, a shy 19-year-old from Sudan, says he and his young friend Salim, 17, have been in Calais for 20 days and seems almost embarrassed to admit most days they go hungry.

"We have potatoes but it is not much," he says, pointing to a small open fire topped with a pot.

"I know where Australia is! I study geography. If I get chance to go to England, I like to study more to be a teacher. I try to but there are dogs, there are fences, the police ... they spray," he says, rubbing red, raw eyes.

Across the English Channel, on the motorways leading to the Eurotunnel, British police this week continued running what has been codenamed Operation Stack in an effort to end the massive logjam of trucks banked due to the Eurotunnel closures.

Tens of thousands of holiday-makers were also delayed, waiting for hours on roadside verges.

While Prime Minister David Cameron pledged millions to build higher fences and boost security with sniffer dogs, Welsh abattoirs, English flower producers and even specialist fishing fleets in Scotland went on standby and faced the possibility of stopping work because of transport delays.

Every year, about €200 billion (\$297bn) worth of exports, from flowers to lamb, cheese, motor industry components and high-grade steel, pass through what is known as the Strait of Dove.

UK Road Haulage Association policy director Jack Semple tells Inquirer that while Calais is without doubt a "huge and complex global humanitarian crisis", the current security chaos also threatens the livelihood and survival of thousands of small and large exporters who depend on the timely movement of goods to and from Europe.

Giving evidence to a parliamentary committee on the crisis two weeks ago, the association told MPs that goods worth thousands of pounds had been written off because of the delays last month, ranging from fresh seafood that had gone off to a £35,000 (\$74,635) load of high-grade steel affected by seawater due to stowaways cutting protective tarpaulins.

"The issues at Calais and international lorries have been going on for years but what's happened in the last six weeks is of an entirely different order of magnitude," Semple tells Inquirer.

Orkney Fisheries Association secretary Fiona Matheson says the fleet based in the archipelago off the far northern coast of Scotland catches thousands of tonnes of lobster, live crab and other shellfish each year, which is then shipped to Spain and Portugal by special trucks circulating sea water around in large holding tanks.

If the shellfish begin to die, they release ammonia into the water, which can set off a chain reaction that kills the rest of the load.

Speaking to Inquirer, however, Matheson points out that while she understands the economic perspectives of the Orkney fishermen, she also wants to emphasise the bonds shared with asylum-seekers in Calais.

"In the Mediterranean, the coast of Africa, Orkney ... they all know the massive perils that come with putting to sea in dangerous boats or in unsafe waters, against the tides, the seas, the elements,

"Even for those that work in hi-tech boats and specialist areas, there is still much in common with the Third World fisherman who has to be resourceful and clever to survive. It is by luck of birth we live in this rich end of the world."

Back in the Jungle of Calais, Zaman Asinse, an Afghan man works meticulously to untangle a sheath of nylon line he's fashioned into a fishing net.

Bits of old rubber thongs and drink bottles are attached as floats and, sensing our interest, he walks us to the remnants of a fire, a pile of fish scales and one large tail fin.

In broken English, he puts up two fingers — for two fish — then spreads his arms out to show their size.

"My son inside," he says, pointing to his tent, made of plastic sheeting and old blankets.

"A good, good dinner", he smiles.



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AFP