

“What’s happening is crazy, it’s inhumane, it doesn’t work, but it’s going zu continue”

Maya Konforti of *L’Auberge des Migrants* has been on the ground in Calais and Grande-Synthe since 2014. In this interview she reflects the recent development and analyzes the current state of evictions, confinement, police violence and boat crossings. This is the closest so far we have come to a longread on this blog. German version will follow.

What are the current locations of camps in the area, and how many people are living there?

Those camps should not even be called camps, but ‘surviving areas’, and they are mostly in Calais and Grande-Synthe. There’s about five different places in Calais. *Zone Industrielle des dunes* is the most populated. In Grande-Synthe there’s two or three places. At *Zone Industrielle des dunes*, there are about 800 to 900 people at the moment (the interview took place early May). Altogether, we counted 1100 people in Calais last week. And that was after about 200 people left for confinement. In Grande-Synthe, there’s only about 400, 500 people. Numbers have gone down there quite a bit, because many have actually made it to the UK recently.

What are the countries of origins, and are there still new arrivals?

There are only two or three trains arriving at Calais every day. But we still see new arrivals. About nationalities: in Calais, there are more Sudanese than there were a year ago, and still quite a few Iranians, Eritreans, Ethiopians, and some from Mali or Mauritania who couldn’t manage to get asylum in France. And Afghans, but less than before. In Grande-Synthe, there is a great majority of Kurdish people from Iraq and a small group of Pakistani people.

How about women, minors and families?

There are very few families in Calais, two or three, and a few single women, sometimes with a young child. And obviously, many families among the Kurdish people in Grande-Synthe, about 30. And about minors: the last count was about 60 in Calais and up to 150 in Grande-Synthe.

How does the situation in Calais differ from the one in Grande-Synthe?

They are quite different, both in terms of nationalities and numbers. The numbers actually fluctuate. Sometimes, there are more people in Grande-Synthe than in Calais. Another difference is the way the local government acts. In Calais, the government has been mandated to install showers and toilets and grant access to water in the spring of 2017, so they are still doing that. They also hand out food, although since the confinement started, they stopped serving hot meals. But still, they serve breakfast and a sandwich for lunch, which the government in Grande-Synthe has never done. In Grande-Synthe, the city installed a few toilets and I believe access to water and maybe a couple of showers, but that was done by the city and not by the prefecture. Another difference: the proposition to go into confinement in Calais was completely voluntary, whether in Grande-Synthe, people have been told to get into the busses and then all their belongings are destroyed, as soon as they have climbed in the busses.

What is the current strategy of local and state authorities? And how do migrants and supporters react?

The local authorities are not acting any differently than during the last two years. Basically, that means so-called evacuations every 48 hours maximum in every single camping area in Calais. It's creating quite a bit of tension with the refugees, because they get so irritated with having to move every 48 hours, just for a couple of hours, and then being able to put their tent back, but many personal belongings disappear every single time there is such an evacuation. So the refugees are being quite tense these days. And the volunteers function with a very reduced capacity. *Refugee Community Kitchen* has basically closed the kitchen until the confinement is over, so they are not serving hot meals anymore, and we have about 20 volunteers at the warehouse who started distributing ingredients for cooking. That means a reduction of our activities, for sure.

How did the outbreak of the virus affect the migrants?

The government offered or encouraged refugees to go into confinement, but it has not been working very well. First of all, because, they say that there's 650 people in Calais when there is about 1100. To start with, they only had a maximum of 480 places available. 380 people went into confinement on a voluntary basis, but over a hundred left the confinement places, because they did not like them for one reason or another. So only about 200 out of those 1100 people actually went into confinement. Probably because they wanted a rest, but the thing is, it's been very nice weather, these last few weeks here, so a lot of refugees have succeeded to go to England by boat or by truck, quite a lot by boat. It is their priority. They have been worried by so many things, the virus is just one of them, it is not really scaring them. And then, they sort of feel that,

even though they live in tents and usually with somebody else, they are still outside. And some of them say, they feel safer from the virus outside, than going into confinement, where they are put into a room with four or five other people and actually stay very close to each other. So some people have come back because of that. They say I don't know why indoors we are safer than outdoors. Plus, they felt they were too far away from Calais, even though those confinement places have been limited to the department of Pas-de-Calais. Still, it's too far to climb into a boat or truck at night.

Do you have any information about conditions in those shelters?

All of them are in the Pas-de-Calais department. One of them is right near Boulogne, in a hotel, one of them is in Armentières, which is close to Lille, in a boarding school. Obviously, those places will not be able to stay open to the refugees after the confinement is over and school starts again. So those people will probably have to leave by May 11th, and in fact all the people left in confinement centers, will probably be put out again in the streets. Other than that, there is some sort of holiday village, a gymnasium, and those places vary in quality from one place to another. In some places, there are four, five people in one room, in others there are two.

Have there been any more COVID-cases after the five reported in april?

No, as *Médecins du Monde* told us a few days ago. In fact, I think officially there were only two, who actually went into centers to recover from COVID. The check-ups are done by *Médecins du Monde* and The Red Cross who go three times a week to *Zone Industrielle des dunes*. They don't go into the other camps that are close to the hospital, only to that main zone where most people stay. They talk to people, make sure that they tell them about social distancing and about the virus, and if people don't feel good and seem to have fever, they actually direct them to a warehouse in *Zone Industrielle des dunes*, where there's volunteers from an association called *Protection Civile*, who do a bit more of a thorough check-up and decide if these people should be taken to hospital. There, they decide if they seem to have COVID19, I say *seem* because none of them are tested. If they seem to have it and they are not feeling well, they put them into those centers to recover, and if they are really sick, they go to hospital. But nobody has been sick enough to go to hospital.

How have the migrants been dealing with this situation?

They are not hugely worried about the virus. What changes is that they don't have a hot meal from *Refugee Community Kitchen* anymore, and neither from *La vie active*, the association mandated by the government, which makes life harder. Another problem is the fact that they can't take the bus to go to the hospital anymore, because

the bus companies and drivers have been expressing their fears about refugees because of the virus. These are the problems caused by the virus.

How is the situation concerning food shortage, malnutrition and stress?

The refugees in Calais were hungry for a little while because of *Refugee Community Kitchen* stopping their work. They knew that the border between the UK and France was going to be closed, and people were afraid that if they got sick, they would not be able to go back home. This is how they took that decision. And then at the same time, *La vie active* stopped serving hot meals. So they only had bread and food for breakfast, and then a sandwich and a yogurt for lunch. This is how we decided to put in place this distribution of ingredients for cooking. We are distributing right now a thousand bags weekly to the various camps in Calais. We distribute three times a week. So now there's no more hunger problems with that, thanks to *The Woodyard* distribution of wood. Another aspect is, because there are less volunteers, the group that usually distributes clothes, tents and sleeping bags, have not distributed clothes at least the last month. And the refugees have been pretty understanding of that, but obviously, it's not making their lives easier to not be able to get clothes. As long as the weather is nice, they can wash their clothes, but when it's raining, it causes problems.

How have the routes to get to the UK been developing recently?

At the moment, I don't think that there are any crossings through the Tunnel. It's been fenced in and barb-wired in like crazy. So through the Tunnel practically nothing, if not nothing. Through trucks, I think they probably still succeed, but we don't have any numbers. I think that the main way to cross nowadays is really by boat. When it started a year and a half ago, it was mostly the Iranians, who tried on their own. Nowadays it's run by the smugglers who are well-organized and there is quite a bit of success with these boat crossings. It's more than one try out of two that actually succeed, which is really a lot. By now it's windy again, but we've had a month of incredibly calm waters, and that made a lot of crossings possible. We had numbers of 150 in a week, and the next week about a hundred.

So by now, it is not only the Iranians trying to cross by boat?

No, it's no longer mostly Iranians. There's many Kurdish people, some Afghans, some Africans as well. Whoever has the money to pay a smuggler, and I think they pay usually about 3.000 euros or 3.000 pounds per person. It varies, but that is an average price. And they cross from many different places, basically anywhere from Dunkirk to

about Le Touquet. It's about 75 kilometres of beaches with at least about 12 places of departure.

Do the boat crossings make it easier to reach the UK, or rather more difficult and dangerous?

It's definitely quite a good way to cross by boat. More than half of the tries that are leaving succeed, which is really a very big number. And so far we've only had four deaths that we know of in the last one and a half years. I think, the biggest danger is to have a problem before they arrive to British waters, and to be brought back by the French coastguards.

Where do the boats depart? And are there different routes to cross the Channel?

Between Calais and Boulogne there's about 12 places. When people leave from Dunkerque, or from further south than Boulogne, it's a much longer crossing, so obviously, it must be done with bigger boats. We haven't heard about people arriving in different places in the UK. But it makes sense that they would constantly try to find new ways. One of these days we'll probably see people leaving from Brittany.

How has the Lockdown been affecting humanitarian and solidarity actions?

Well there isn't per se confinement within the areas where the refugees are staying. When you have 800 people living on a few acres, it's pretty tricky, and under the conditions that they are living, social distancing is pretty impossible. All the tents are right next to each other. When *La vie active* serve breakfast, people have to stand with a yard or a yard and a half between each other. Then they go eat their breakfast, close to their friends, so it's pretty crazy. The government tried to increase the access to water, but when it was nice weather, we did complain about the fact that there wasn't enough water, particularly in the other camps outside *Zone industrielle des dunes*, because those camps don't have faucets. So, the government can only bring jugs of water, and they were not bringing enough. – How did the lockdown affect our actions? Well, they did affect because the government first decided that they wanted to have the names of everybody who was going to drive and distribute tents and sleeping bags and food. We complained about that. Then they asked for the vehicles' license plates, saying that there could not be more than 2 people in a van. During this time, we also had to reduce volunteers. In fact we've had people asking to volunteer with us, because they are confined at home, and we've been reluctant to accept them because every time people come to Calais, they have to learn about the situation, which now is more complicated because of the confinement. So, we have been reluctant to accept new volunteers, given the risk of them being infected. So the only people that we've accepted are the ones who already know Calais, who have been volunteers before. But

as confinement is about to end, by the end of May we'll definitely have some people come, and they will be welcome.

How do you think this situation will develop?

On the short term, I think that people who have gone into confinement will be put back out on the street. Depending on the weather, people will keep on trying. Neither in the short term nor in the long term do we expect things to change, unfortunately. We are constantly trying to find ways to stop the evacuations. They have been responsible for the recent difficulties. Confinement plus evacuation plus the horrible situation in which people live, that creates tremendous stress. But unfortunately, we can't seem to find any legal loophole to stop those evacuations.

Can you give us more details about these constant evacuations?

Officially, they are not evacuations, but just actions to move refugees every 48 hours, so that they cannot claim it is their place. If they could, the government would have to go to court in order to get a ruling to evacuate people. It's a ridiculous thing, going on for over two years, and it happens constantly, at least every 48 hours, sometimes more often. Their whole thing is: no point of fixation, they don't want any camp like the Jungle that existed in 2015 and 2016, and it's completely ridiculous, because it does exist! So, they are just pushing people and telling them to move their tents. They take their belongings and people come back in exactly the same place, and they do that again, 48 hours later. Still, people have been staying for months in exactly the same place, so there is a point of fixation. Calais is a point of fixation, and that cannot be changed, just because of the geographical location of Calais. And so, what's happening is crazy, it's inhumane, it doesn't work, but it's going to continue.

Politically, which goals do you see in the current situation?

We come back to always the same thing: these people want to go to the UK, and they have good reasons for it. And the only way to improve the situation would be if the Home Office had office at what they call the British border. Which, according to the British, is in Calais. So why do you still have to go to the UK in order to claim asylum? At least all the people who can ask for asylum, with their fingerprints and so forth, would ask for asylum, and these people wouldn't live in the horrible conditions that they live in. That would actually be a solution for at least a good part of the people. It would even cost less money than what the UK spends currently, on police forces, drones, the fences, the barbed wire. Most of that is paid for by the UK.

Then, there's still the Dublin regulation, that doesn't make any sense. This whole Having to ask for asylum in the first European country you entered is completely crazy, because it's always the same countries: Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, and partly Hungary, and those places are not good at all to ask for asylum. An Afghan, for example, with a 70 or 80 percent chance to be accepted in France and a 40 per cent one in Germany, would have a three per cent chance in Hungary. On top of that, even if you do have papers in Hungary, racism is so rampant, it's gonna be really really hard to rebuild one's life there or in Italy. So, Dublin regulation, again and again and again: this is what we would like to change.

Are the French media still reporting about the situation?

There is absolutely nothing about Calais and Grande-Synthe in the news. Everything is about people being confined in their homes, some in a comfortable place, some not, but that's all you hear about. There's never anything about the refugees.

Have there been any cases of self organization or political statements by refugees recently?

There was an open letter written by the Eritreans to complain about CRS [*Compagnies républicaines de sécurité*, riot police, constantly present in Calais] violence. Other than that, recently there has not been any political organization among the refugees. There's been some over the years, but it never lasts for long, because after a while refugees realized that they write things, they talk to journalists, they debate, and nobody hears them and things don't change. They still think the only solution is to go to the UK. We still believe strongly that humanitarian aid alone doesn't change anything, but we do need to take political action at the same time, so we try to do both. I have been involved since 2014 and there was a whole group of political activists who wanted to change things and believed that the right way was to teach the refugees about their rights and to fight for them. But those people have all gone, they are all gone out of Calais, or they're not very involved anymore.

How did the level of police violence develop since the beginning of the lockdown?

It's pretty much the same. It has been existing, and it's going to keep on existing. The CRS companies come to Calais for three weeks, and they are from all over France. And when they arrive, they're not familiar with the situation and know nothing about. They're probably briefed by their chiefs, that the refugees are people you need to be careful of, and that they're violent, and things like that. And what's happening is, that some companies work in a very different way than others, which probably depends on their chiefs, and how they encourage their CRS to act. To be more violent, or maybe just closing their eyes or turning their back.

Recently, we issued a big complaint, and the Eritreans wrote a letter, because one company somehow seemed to have something against the Eritreans in a specific camp in Calais and they were incredibly violent. They used their batons, they severely hurt a few people, and they seemed to do that every time they arrived in that camp. I don't know what started it, but it was one specific company. We took the numbers, the license plate of their vehicle, and we complained to the subprefect. The Eritreans wrote an open letter asking for it to stop. Basically, the subprefect answered that they were going to do an internal investigation of which we will probably never hear anything, or he will say that nothing happened, because it's always the words of the people versus the words of the police. He also told us that this company had left, so that particular violence has eased up, but there's new things like that happen constantly, so it fluctuates. There isn't more police violence because of the confinement. Maybe they're hassling people a bit more, like they try to discourage them from leaving the camp and tell them that they can't do that, but it goes on and off, actually, it's always somewhat on and sometimes it gets really worse, but I don't think it's because of the confinement.

There were some tensions in the last few weeks. Can you tell us anything about what was playing on the background?

Well, there was some tension, and this vehicle of ours got burnt down. It happens quite regularly that basically there are tensions and distributions must stop, the volunteers must pack up their van really quickly and leave, and then they come back when things have calmed down. Often, this happens because one person loses it and gets angry and then some people join in or try to stop that person. Sometimes it happens because a refugee or a couple have been drinking, which is understandable given the situation. Tension is there, because there's too many reasons that stress them out: besides the living situation, there is the virus, there is the social distancing to pay attention to. The food issue is at least improved by now. But these last couple of days, it's been wild rain and wind, and the refugees must be absolutely soaked. Plus the evacuations on top of it all, it just basically pushes people to the edge. It's only normal that they would break down and get angry suddenly for the simplest reason. Often people blow up for one little thing and then suddenly you have two groups fighting.

There has been a massive amount of newly built fences in Calais in the last few months. What are they about?

These fences are basically to make the areas where refugees can go smaller and smaller. Some of those fences are installed not by the British but by the city of Calais, either because the land that they surround belongs to some private people, or to the city. The city fences those pieces of land to prevent people from setting there. So at this point, the fences have been built and the barbed-wire been put up, but the people still live sort of inside those fences, they haven't been closed off yet, but that will

happen. Basically, it makes it harder and harder for refugees to find a place to set up their tent. What's really crazy about Calais is the number of little forests or parks that have been fenced in, with a gate added to them, to prevent refugees from setting up their tent there. The city has actually closed the gate as well, locked the gate, and so the refugees of course cannot settle there any longer, but neither can the Calais people go for a walk. So those places are literally locked to everybody, and that's really, really insane. There's several parks in Calais that are like that.

We have not really heard about any deaths at the border in a while.

It's true, there have been very few deaths. There were more deaths when more people tried to get to the UK by truck. They would get hurt because they sometimes jumped from the top of a truck and hurt themselves, or got run over crossing the highway. I remember one refugee got crushed by the load when the truck he was in had to brake suddenly. These situations caused quite a few deaths. By boat, there seem to be way less. There's only been four in the last year and a half, that says: four that were found, while there might have been some others that we were not.

Actually, the boat crossings were deemed totally unsafe and impossible, but it's turning out to be a way that is working relatively well. And it is increasing. There were more crossings in 2019 than in 2018, and I think this year there's been quite a few.

Do you have information about missing people?

No, we don't know of any missing people. If people had been trying to cross by boat and had somehow capsized and drowned, refugees would come to us and say their friend, sister, or cousin is lost, and if we know where they could be? And then we would scout the newspapers and try to see if there's been an accident, but we haven't had any. Which leads me to think that there haven't been any, any deaths or actually very, very few cases of people drowning at sea.

What is the situation concerning Brexit?

If you pay attention to the news, Brexit no longer exists. We haven't heard a word about Brexit in the last two months, the only word we hear all day long is confinement and virus. Brexit, what's that? In fact, nothing is changing until the end of the year.