



# THE CALAIS JUNGLE: A REFLECTION OF LAWLESSNESS AND INHUMANE ANTI-MIGRATION POLICIES

The city of Calais and its surrounding areas constitute a transit zone between France and the United Kingdom for refugees, essentially originating from Central Africa and the Middle East, who attempt to reach the United Kingdom in order to benefit from better living conditions and employment opportunities. Most refugees are fleeing countries at war, destroyed, and without any prospects of employment. For more than twenty years, people wishing to reach the British coast have thus travelled to northern France and settled there while awaiting their departure.

This large number of arrivals has led to the creation of the largest informal camp in Europe, known as the “Calais Jungle.” The “Calais Jungle” refers to precarious settlements, shantytowns, and camps of migrants and refugees that first appeared in the 1990s. These camps are regularly destroyed and dismantled by law enforcement forces but are systematically reconstituted. Their population has varied over the past 30 years according to political decisions, the international context, and changes in European migration policies.

This main crossing area between France and the United Kingdom is central to French migration policy. Torn between humanitarian needs and national border control issues, the situation demonstrates the inability of the French government to implement migration policies that comply with fundamental human rights.

The Calais Jungle is the embodiment of the anti-migration policies jointly pursued by France and the United Kingdom and of bilateral agreements violating the rights of refugees.



In Calais, in 2016, the emergency accommodation camp had insufficient capacity, and the shantytowns were located right next to it. ([BBC News](#), 2016)

THIS LARGE NUMBER OF ARRIVALS HAS LED TO THE CREATION OF THE LARGEST INFORMAL CAMP IN EUROPE, KNOWN AS THE “CALAIS JUNGLE.”



Children living in the Calais jungle, some for more than two years ([BBC News](#), 2016)



The shantytowns of the Calais Jungle, where exiles live in disastrous conditions and without access to basic necessities. ([BBC News](#), 2016)

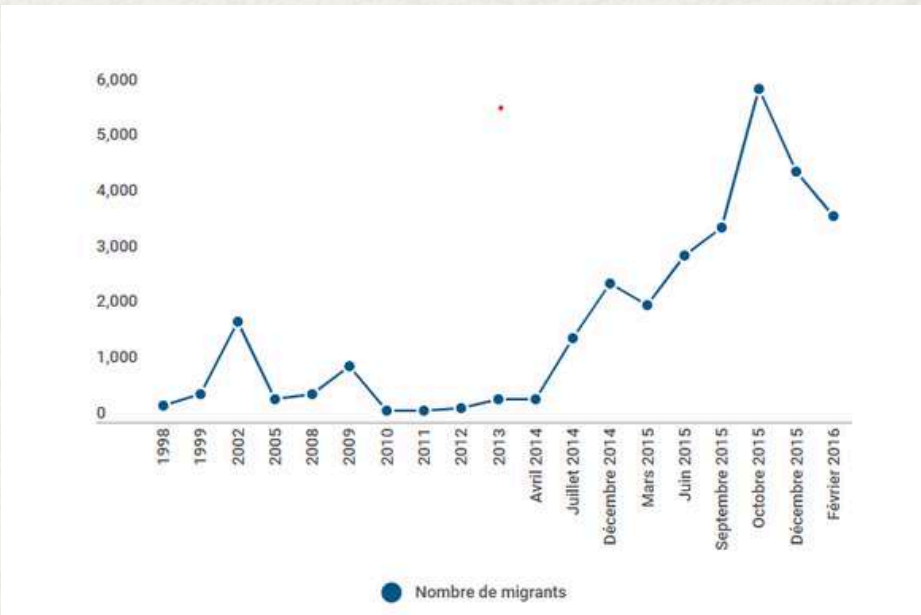


For many migrants, the city of Calais is an unavoidable space because it is the gateway to Great Britain, viewed as a land of asylum. Since the 1990s, the coast has represented a control point between France and England. The first arrivals in Calais in the 1990s came mainly from Eastern Europe, notably Kosovo, in connection with the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia and the resulting conflicts, as well as from Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2002, the closure of the Red Cross Sangatte Centre, opened in 1999 to cope with these numerous arrivals, constitutes the birth date of the Calais Jungle. Indeed, migrants no longer having access to accommodation gathered in the north-east of Calais, and an illegal makeshift camp of around one thousand migrants emerged and became the first camp of the “Jungle.” The Jungle was dismantled for the first time in 2009 and was re-formed less than two years later.

In 2015, its size increased tenfold. Migrants then came from the Middle East, Syria, Somalia, and Eritrea. In 2014, the prefecture of Pas-de-Calais counted 800 migrants; there were 6,000 in 2015 and 9,000 in 2016. At the end of August, 10,000 people were surviving in these shantytowns and makeshift shelters. On 24 October 2016, the Jungle was dismantled by order of the Ministry of the Interior. Seven thousand migrants were affected by the dismantling of the camp. While some refugees benefited from emergency accommodation within newly created reception centres, too large a proportion of undocumented occupants found themselves without any place to sleep. These individuals then wandered in the city centre of Calais and in the surrounding forests.

After the dismantling of the Jungle, migrants are still present and their living conditions have deteriorated. Migrants are now scattered around the area, camping in wooded zones. The closure of the Jungle led to an increase in precarious camps. According to a [Human Rights Watch report](#) in 2021, approximately 2,000 migrants are still located “in wooded areas, abandoned warehouses, and under bridges in Calais and its surroundings,” including nearly 300 unaccompanied children.

Since the dismantling, the French government has pursued a policy of hostility towards migrants: the police carry out daily evacuations of the makeshift camps that replaced the Jungle. Since 2016, law enforcement forces have adopted the strategy of “zero fixation points” in order to prevent exiled people from settling durably and to avoid the formation of a new Jungle. They conduct almost daily evacuations, evict migrants from their precarious camps, and confiscate their tents and personal belongings. The authorities engage in a genuine “hunt for migrants”. According to the organisation [Human Rights Observer](#), the police carried out more than 950 eviction operations in Calais in 2020.



L'évolution du nombre de migrants à Calais ([France Bleu](#), 2016)  
Source: Pas-de-Calais Prefecture



Several hundred migrants are camped in the woods near Calais, in squalid living conditions, 5 years after the dismantling of the Jungle camp. ([The Guardian](#), 2021)



French police evacuate some 800 migrants after they dismantled their camp on September 29, 2020 (AFP), [Arab News](#)



Moreover, a form of urban planning hostile to migrants has been implemented. The authorities have installed large rocks and stone blocks at certain usual distribution points in order to prevent the parking of humanitarian trucks. Access to improvised distribution sites has been made impossible.

Between 2020 and 2022, prefectural decrees prohibited food distribution by non-mandated associations.

Finally, the French government has reinforced the security apparatus. Thermal cameras, drones, and floating barriers have been installed to deter departures.

All of these procedures put in place undermine the fundamental rights of refugees.

These anti-migration measures and policies do not deter refugees but worsen their living conditions. Migrants, now scattered, have more difficulty accessing distributions and basic necessities. The camps severely lack resources, sanitation facilities, and drinking water.

Life within the camps is punctuated by fights, sexual violence, and epidemics. Single women living in the migrant camps are particularly vulnerable. They are exposed to the risk of rape and forced prostitution.

Temporary emergency accommodation schemes have been implemented by the prefecture, but they are largely insufficient.

Furthermore, the tightening of migration laws and the reinforcement of police controls have contributed to accelerating risky departures towards the British coast. The deplorable living conditions force exiles to take increasingly serious risks. They rush their attempts and engage in an increasing number of deadly crossings.

The United Nations recorded 207 cases of migrants who died or went missing while attempting to cross the Channel between 2016 and 2024.

THESE ANTI-MIGRATION MEASURES AND POLICIES DO NOT DETER REFUGEES BUT WORSEN THEIR LIVING CONDITIONS.



Roughly every two days, police swoop into public lots in Calais to order anyone camping there to gather their belongings and go ([Politico Europe](#), 2024)



Thousands of refugees are attempting to reach the English coast on precarious boats, risking their lives ([Politico Europe](#), 2024)

Numerous associations intervene to compensate for the inaction of the state. Humanitarian organisations organise distributions of meals, wooden boards, and blankets. They provide migrants with food, water, clothing, and charging points for their mobile phones. For example, the association “La Vie Active” distributes 600 meals per day.

The situation in Calais reflects a bilateral anti-migration agreement between the United Kingdom and France. Indeed, several agreements have been concluded between France and the UK to prevent irregular crossings. In 2003, the Touquet Treaty provided for the displacement of the British border and migration controls to the French coast, at the point of embarkation of potential refugees. France is thus responsible for retaining and preventing refugees from reaching the British coast in exchange for hundreds of millions of pounds paid by the UK. This constitutes an inhumane externalisation of border control.



Since 2014, the United Kingdom has paid France half a billion euros to secure their shared border. In 2023, London committed to paying an additional 541 million euros by 2026. These funds are used by France to finance the security and control of the border.

In 2016, the construction of an anti-intrusion wall along the Calais port ring road was initiated with UK funding but was ultimately halted.

In March 2023, an agreement provided for the reinforcement of French police forces in exchange for an increase in the British financial contribution, amounting to 72.2 million euros.

The United Kingdom and France invest heavily in securing the area, in the repressive means of law enforcement, and in inhumane deterrence policies. However, the means employed are ineffective in reducing the number of migrants in the area.

Indeed, these measures do not reduce the influx of exiles to Calais but merely serve to worsen living conditions in the camps and to exacerbate violations of refugees’ fundamental human rights.

FRANCE IS THUS RESPONSIBLE  
FOR RETAINING AND PREVENTING  
REFUGEES FROM REACHING THE  
BRITISH COAST IN EXCHANGE FOR  
HUNDREDS OF MILLIONS OF  
POUNDS PAID BY THE UK.



Alice De Vellis, French student in her second year of political science at the Institute of Political Studies in Grenoble, on a one-year university exchange at Galatasaray.