

Notes from the Jungle 3. Refugees, and how the UK government could help itself



Not every story you hear from refugees is one of heroism, triumph over adversity, or harrowing despicable mistreatment suffered and overcome to reach a destination.

Though almost every person you speak to *has* a story like that, many people are still too emotionally involved – perhaps even ashamed – when you meet them, to share it with a stranger.

Others are simply never likely to do so, preferring to keep certain things to themselves, while others still are focussed on the future, not wanting to pause to look back, perhaps, until they reach their target.

In the next few days, there will be more ‘stories’ from the Jungle, but today we meet three young men who are looking forward, with an analysis of the barriers they – in common with every one of the 6,000 people here – are facing.

➤ Qais, Yemen, 21.

'There is war where I am from. It is not safe to be there. Many people are dying because of the war and even more are hungry. Some will starve. That is why I came to the Jungle. I have been here two months. It is not good.

'I want to come to the UK because I am 21, I speak English, and I have family there – one uncle in London and two in Birmingham.

'I have not applied because I don't know how to apply. I ran from Yemen and came across Europe to get here but now I am here I don't know how to get out of here.

'It's hard. There are just two Yemeni people here. I don't know what to do. I am waiting and trying to think of what to do.'

➤ **Gol, Afghanistan.**

'I have been here one year.

'Every night since I have been here, people try to cross the barriers to get to trains. Their legs break, or fingers break and they have to come back. It is very difficult here.

'I want to go to the UK because life is good there. In Afghanistan, it is impossible. There is fighting and kidnapping. It isn't safe to stay there and it's hard to find a job. Europe is finished – there is no work in Italy, France or Germany.

'But people say English life is nice. The TV says so as well, so I am trying to get to the UK so I can have a job and be safe. I would like to go back to my home when it is safe. While I am in the UK I can look and see when it is safe, while I do a job and live in a safe place. I've never been to the UK, but people say it's a good life.

'People who have been, and people from England. The government, and in my country the English soldiers say life is good in the UK.

'I don't have any documents. I ran away and it was better not to have any because if the wrong people had stopped me and seen my documents they could have kidnapped me or hurt me. It is better not to have papers when you are crossing some places.

'Nobody has come here to explain anything to the people who are living here. We don't know what we should do or how to do it. Some people have come to give out clothes and shoes, but there is no medicine when you get sick, and no-one has come with forms to go to the UK.

'It's hard to know what to do.'

➤ **Abdul, Eritrea**

'People here don't have anything. I need to move to England. That's what most people here prefer.

'I came here to get to England. From my point of view, I prefer England because I know the language, and some other criteria. But the government of England makes it hard. Not just hard to come, because I know countries can make it hard to come. But it is making it hard because it is not letting us even apply to come.

'We are refugees here, but we are not allowed to apply to be allowed to the UK.

'There are big problems in Eritrea. Our leaders and government is a dictatorship, autocratic. It oppresses people. People are not free to express their ideas, or themselves, or to discuss matters in public or in private. There is no freedom of speech and there is violence if people do talk. People are put in prison, or tortured.

'There are big political problems and big religious problems. If you are not Muslim – like I am not – you have very big problems and can be beaten and injured.

'I have been here for almost two weeks.

'It is difficult here. I don't have good experiences here, or a good life. I live in a tent. We all live in tents. I am not satisfied. We are not rich, we have nothing left, so there is no stability.

'And we know within a short period, things will change. The weather will get worse, I think. The governments must focus on these ideas.'

The Jungle – and the problem with the government which ignores it

These interviews – and the Jungle itself – risk painting a slightly misleading picture of the wider international refugee crisis.

The Jungle is a camp on the edge of the English Channel, and so, as one might expect, most of its inhabitants are aiming to get to the UK.

The problem is, that rather raises the question 'why do all these people want to come to the UK?' which is a bad question both in terms of being the wrong *question*, and of leading people to the wrong *conclusion*.

More than 590,000 people have crossed the Mediterranean to reach the EU so far this year. Six thousand of them – about one per cent – are in the Jungle.

That's the first reason the question itself is wrong: people in the UK see that in the camp closest to them, there are 6,000 people, which sounds like a lot; and know they 'want' to come to the UK. It is then easy to extrapolate that as there are 590,000 refugees in Europe, most of *them* 'want' to come to the UK.

The simple fact is, they do not: only one per cent of the people who have entered Europe since January this year have come as far as the Jungle. *They* – that one per cent – are the people who 'want' to come to the UK.

Next. The idea that people 'want' to come to the UK. In the main, they do not.

What they want is to live in their home countries. Because their home countries are too dangerous for them to remain, they want to stay alive and find somewhere safe to stay and work until they can return home.

Those are the two things people 'want'. It is only after the first option is removed that the second comes into play and it is only after they are satisfied that the UK meets the second criteria – it is safe and there may be jobs so they can stay alive – that any 'desire' to come to the UK becomes a factor. And there are simple reasons why it does.

First, the UK is extraordinarily wealthy – the world's fifth richest state. In the EU, only Germany is richer, and in the world, only Germany, Japan, the US and China (*and even then, the number of people living in poverty is higher in the US and China than in the UK*). The chances are high that people arriving in the UK can find a job and have access to education and medicine, and low that they will starve to death or die of preventable disease.

Second, the UK is – generally – politically and culturally tolerant. Because there are communities of Somalians, Eritreans and Sudanese people in the UK, it is reasonable for Eritreans, Somalians and Sudanese people to believe they will be able to live and work without hindrance in the UK.

Third, our films, books, music and other cultural activity – as well as the words of our politicians and soldiers – convince people that the UK is a good place to live. If you are forced from your home, why not choose somewhere you have been repeatedly told is a good place to be?

Fourth, connected to the second point, many people have family and friends in the UK. They hope to be able to reunite with them – albeit only because they have been forced from where they *want* to be by war, oppression, torture and terror, and albeit only temporarily.

And fifth, connected to the third point – because of our (*and the US'*) near cultural hegemony, and the legacy of the British Empire – many people at the Jungle speak English. And it is of course far easier to settle and find work in a country where you understand what people say, and can answer them, than in one where you first have to learn to do either.

But there is another point. Not only do the inhabitants of the Jungle make up only one per cent of the refugees to have come to the EU in the last ten months, not all of them want to enter the UK. In fact, the estimate at present (*it has to be an estimate – the UK government's policy of refusing to help people apply to enter the UK legally also means it has cut off the simplest route to definitive statistics on the crisis and its trends. This may not be accidental*) is that roughly two-thirds do, while perhaps as many as 2,000 have no great desire to live in the UK.

So, you may ask, why are they there?

Since late August, the Jungle's population – which had fallen over the summer from 5,000 to 3,000, has doubled.

One reason is that wars continue all over the world, and people continue to need to escape them.

But another is that states are continuing to act alone within the international refugee crisis – and most are choosing to behave selfishly, recklessly, and irresponsibly.

While Hungary has put up walls and the UK government is using the Channel as both a moat and a sound-proofed barrier between it and the crisis, other states are closing refugee camps and forcibly evicting their inhabitants. One example is at Ventimiglia, on Italy's border with France, which was closed by Italian police at the end of September.

Though Ventimiglia was relatively small, it was not the only example of this process, and to put it simply, refugees are people – they have to go somewhere.

And so we are left with a situation in which – in part because the UK, Hungary and others have refused point blank to allow the EU to address the wider crisis as a political bloc – there are now up to 2,000 people on the banks of the Channel *who do not particularly want to come to the UK*.

It is just one more example of how governments closing their ears and eyes – as well as their minds – to the world around them has made their own predicament, and that of thousands of vulnerable, desperate people, far worse than it needs to be.

It is to be hoped that at some point, the UK government might realise this, and do something about it. Not only might it benefit them, it is also the only way to prevent potentially thousands of deaths at the Jungle this winter, and in the winters which follow.