

Notes from the Jungle 4. Health, Welfare and Organisation.



You glance inside one tent as you walk by. Two packets of sliced meat are swiftly covered by a man who turns and smiles at you, as if embarrassed.

To have your own food here – even a small amount – is a symbol of independence; of not needing to rely on the meagre handouts that are available (*the camp never has enough food to feed all of its inhabitants on any given day*), and even of a step towards, or memory of, security and stability – a meal beyond simply the next donated bowl of soup.

But there is no refrigeration here, nowhere to store food, meaning that even these sorrowful attempts to have something other than the grim cycle of waking, queueing for handouts, then sleeping, with no possibility of escape other than to risk death on road or rail, are themselves potential carriers of sickness, disease or death.

The Jungle does not reward inaction. But neither does it reward endeavour, or forward planning.

It is simply a trap, a high-sided box without handholds or ridges, into which 6,000 people have fallen and have no choice but to smash their way out, or wait to be noticed by governments which have turned their backs and closed their ears to them.

a) Health

Three caravans tucked away in the Jungle's north-eastern corner – donated by the simply-named UK initiative, *Caravans for Calais* – have been turned into miniature health centres.

They are not exactly 'medical centres' (*Medecins Sans Frontiers and Doctors of the World both operate at the Jungle and provide the only 'technical' medical expertise at the camp*) because the volunteers here are normally not medically-trained (*though two doctors and a dentist – all volunteers – are due to arrive for two days the week after you leave*), but places where wounds can be bandaged, nits and scabies treated and paracetamol issued for aches and pains.

It is not ideal, but it is the best that's available at this holding centre for the people trapped 'between' the world's fifth- and sixth-richest states.

One volunteer turns to you: 'We just do lots of little things, whatever we can. The perception here seems to be that the Muslim men feel they are keeping women safe by keeping them in their tents, so those men come sometimes asking for us to help women. At that point it's good there are three of us here, because otherwise we'd have to shut up the caravans.'

'But the Ethiopian and Eritrean women, in particular, are extremely visible and they do not stay in tents. We try to encourage the children to come to see us because this is a safe area and because there are some we worry about. Some of them are extremely vulnerable, and have lost their families at some point on their way to the camp.'

'We are very limited in what we can do to help, but if they are near here, we can at least help to make sure they are known within the camp, and they are not getting into more danger and hardship than they are already in.'

'You have seen the police here?' one team member asks. You nod. They wear armour and look a little like Robocop, but in groups of 10-16.

'They don't look all that nice. We haven't seen any actual attacks, but we have had some people come in with what look like baton blows to the eyes, the head and across the back. They certainly look like the results of attacks. A couple of weeks ago, the police wouldn't come. Now there are ten units here daily.'

The majority of wounds come from other sources, however. 'We get a lot of people coming with their hands cut up by razor wire. The major problem is, we bandage the wounds and protect them from infection, but they aren't healing well. It may be dehydration, or poor nutrition, so their bodies just can't do what they should.'

A scabies outbreak has also caused problems. 'We have cream to stop it,' one volunteer explains. 'You have to wear it for eight hours. It's inconvenient, but that's not so bad. The problem is, to prevent getting it again, we are then supposed to tell people to burn their clothes and bedding, and get new stuff, and...' they pause. 'Well, it's just not possible, here, is it? So what we're doing just seems useless.'

The small team, due to leave two days after you, also warn that serious epidemics are a constant possibility. 'Cholera is particularly possible, because people are taking water in bottles, instead of loo roll, into the toilet to clean themselves. Then when the toilets are emptied, the vehicle filters cause the bottles to be dropped back onto the ground, covered in faeces. Of course it would be better to encourage people to use toilet paper but there just isn't any here. So there's a real risk, and we couldn't cope at this point with an outbreak of cholera.'

b) Distribution

Walking from the caravans towards the Afghan village, you happen upon a distribution which encapsulates some of the Jungle's best and worst features.

Women and children do not attend distributions here. Not because they are not living here, or even because they do not venture out of their tents. They do live here, and you see them in the same places as the men, the children playing, the women walking, talking, collecting water, or carrying materials.

It is because the distributions are poorly-organised. That is not a criticism of the volunteers running them – still less of those who donate items to begin with. Both groups are acting with the best of intentions and to the best of their ability. But without experience of distributions – whether of food, water, clothing or anything else – it is easy to forget how difficult they are, and how fast they become a test of courage and physical capacity.

You watch as a van reverses, opens its back doors and the people within begin to hand out clothing.

Within seconds, a crowd – made up of people about to enter a winter colder than most of them have ever experienced, and many of whom have just one set of clothes to call their own – is jostling, manoeuvring, competing physically to reach the shirts, socks, jumpers and trousers. It is not aggressive, just guided by desperation.

Women and children do watch – they are as desperate as the men for warmth and the chance to change their clothes, wash the ones in which they stand. Some of the luckier ones may 'have' a man – a partner, brother, friend or father – in the crowd.

But they cannot hope to compete for themselves, and so the accidental disorganisation disqualifies all but the strongest in the Jungle from benefitting even from the kindness and charity of strangers.

You turn and walk back towards the Afghan village...