

Notes from the Jungle 7. Francois, France, the UK and the real world

'I live in a little village by the sea. It is out of the real world. This camp, here, is part of the real world.'

'The real world is dictators. It is trouble, fighting and war. I cannot live near the real world and not be a part of it. I cannot turn away and not be a part of it.'



Heading east once more on the white stone road, you catch up with Francois, a man you have been hoping to meet at the Jungle.

Francois has been working for *Auberge des Migrants*, an aid organisation focussed on Calais and the rights and welfare of people trapped in the Jungle, for two years.

In that time – and although Auberge itself has been in existence for seven years – he has become known as one of the few true ‘experts’ on the camp.

‘I live near Calais,’ he explains. ‘And I am now retired. I wanted to be useful.’

‘My father was so racist. As a teenager, I hated him for it.’

‘I decided to apply the true beliefs and attitudes of Catholicism to my life – that everyone is good and deserves to be treated well. But I also went further. I try to say that people are my brothers, and my sisters, who I should care about as they would care about me.’

‘What if I needed help? Who would help me? That’s what’s happening here. I, and other people, are doing what we can to help people who need help.’

‘It is not enough. But it is what we can do. It is how we help.’

Auberge des Migrants, Francois explains, provides a variety of services to refugees at Calais, but even as he explains, you can feel his frustration at what it is *not* able to do, at the shortfalls he experiences each day:

‘We are trying to build shelters before the end of November,’ he begins. ‘We have managed 130 so far, which are good for about 700 people. But we have to build 20 per day during November, so we must step up our effort.’

‘We build frames and give materials to others to build them. These shelters are larger and a little more sturdy than one and two people’s tents.’

‘No, it is not ideal. It is not what is needed. We know that people need heated shelters, which are properly weather-proof, just like they need food, clean water, places to wash. But we can only do what we are able to do, so we are trying to do our best.’

‘Some things are donated,’ (*you have seen people working on the shelter frames wearing the red hooded staff tops from Dismaland, bearing the name of Banksy’s temporary theme park. On Dismaland’s closure, Banksy publicly donated all the site’s building materials – and some other things, including the tops, to the Jungle*).

‘And we buy wood pallets so we can use them to build. The largest part of what we can do is paid for by British money. Not from the government of Britain, from donations by people who live in Britain. Private people.’

‘We are using the money at the moment to manage the building, and to build capacity here so people can build, we meet and train them.’

‘It is not enough. No-one should die, but all we can hope for is that fewer people will die than if the people here were just left as they are.’

‘Look at these shelters. They are better than what is here already, but you and I would not want to live in one through the winter. For people with too little food, it’s just not possible they will all survive.’

‘We are working. It is hard, because we cannot succeed. We can only try to make things a little better. Only the governments could succeed here, and they do not help.’

It is not the first criticism of governments’ response – or more accurately, lack of it – that you have heard at the Jungle. Nor will it be the last.

But the intensity of Francois’ feeling on this, simmering beneath his placid appearance and calmly measured words, adds even greater resonance to the point on which almost everyone here seems agreed: that two governments have not even abandoned the people living at the Jungle – for that would imply they had at one point engaged with them in some way – they have persecuted them by turned their backs on them. They have actively caused their suffering by deliberately not acting.

‘I begin work at 8am and finish at 3am. It is not a complaint. How could I do anything else? How could I go to sleep knowing there is more to do here? How can I sleep knowing how people are forced to live here? I have to be exhausted or I would never sleep at all.’

(This is a theme you have heard before from humanitarian workers, including some you have lived and worked alongside – that they cannot sleep knowing that there is so much more to be done, and that their activity is important to other people, so they have a responsibility to simply keep going, without sleep.

You told them you sympathised, and understood, but that they must understand that this is an ever-decreasing spiral; that without sleep, people simply become more and more tired, and less and less efficient, meaning that in the long term, the amount of work they have to do simply to stand still will increase, rather than decrease. You are well aware that this is not something for which they should be blamed, or blame themselves: what is needed are colleagues; help; support.

At this moment, however, surrounded by thousands of people trapped in a detritus-strewn human trap, it seems somehow inappropriate to reach out and lay a hand on his shoulder. You will wonder, later, whether you should have done.)

‘We do try to distribute things,’ he continues. ‘Clothes, shoes. But there is not enough of anything, especially sleeping bags. We ask people, to say please give us stuff and we will distribute it. But that should not be the responsibility of individual people. It should be being done by the governments.’

He pauses, looks around. His eyes and yours briefly take in a tent with children’s toys hanging out to dry.

He sighs: ‘Yesterday I met some law students. They were very interested to have information about the fact that here there are food issues, that they had heard people steal from each other. But I asked them, do you know who doesn’t respect the law? The government.

‘The children here should be at school. That is a law in France.

‘Women and children should be protected. That is also law.

‘But here, there is no protection for people.

‘The police are sometimes violent and they control people at the entry to the road. This is illegal. You cannot restrict people’s movements under French law. People are trapped. No law allows the police to do that.

‘The government is arresting people and sending them to other places in France, such as Toulouse.

‘They are putting them in prison there. This is not allowed by law. And it has no point. People are held for as little as 3-4 days, but then they are freed and they come straight back here. What else can they do? Where could they go?

‘We must say that at the Jungle, the French government is not respecting its own laws.’

A troop of police officers, 12 men in all, marches past, carrying shields and wearing body armour including shoulder protectors.

‘At the beginning of the camp, the police used to walk around. Then they stopped coming in at all.

‘But now the police have started walking here again. We would prefer it if the police wore normal clothes, and were just talking to people, but these people are walking in armour and they do not say anything to anyone unless they suspect them of something. This is not the police you want.

‘Some police here are dangerous.’ He shrugs. ‘Of course, some are not.’

But the French government, and its police, are not alone in creating and developing the Jungle’s surreally awful situation.

Francois turns. ‘I cannot understand why the French government is OK to ‘protect’ the British border,’ he begins. ‘The cost is high financially, and here socially.

'The government is paying for 1,400 police and private security people here and at the port and Eurostar. It costs more than €100m per year.

'But I can understand why there are problems here, and it's because of the UK. Not the UK's people, but its government.

'People in Calais are bored and angry with migrants. Port traffic is decreasing because organisations are sending traffic elsewhere to avoid the situation here.

'I can't explain why the French government accepts this situation. Maybe there are secret deals. I don't know.

'But I can't understand why the government carries on with this situation. The minimum necessary is for it to have an office here, to work here.'

You both begin walking once again, keeping to the right of the path as it winds between two raised areas, each of which are covered with tents. You both smile and say hello to two young women, carrying blankets and shoes.

'Most women here are Eritrean, or Ethiopian,' Francois explains. 'At least, most of the women you see each day.

'They are teachers, students, they have university educations. But sometimes they fall into prostitution and they are forced to find a 'partner' who can 'protect' them.

'It is not OK. It is not acceptable. But they need money.'

You continue walking, Francois pointing out parts of the camp, and explaining who lives in each, until you reach the end of the path.

You turn left, realising only then that Francois will head right. As he begins to say goodbye, you ask: 'Francois, what do people here at the camp really need?'

He stops, and cocks his head to the left.

'People need to be free to enter countries in Europe,' he begins. 'They want to work, to send money to their families. They want to live with their families, in safety. They want to finish their studies. They need to be able to finish and add to their education.

'They need security. They need their families to be safe. Most people here are middle class. The poorest people can't get this far – I hate to think about what they go through. People here are skilled. They want to use their skills. They speak many languages. They would have no problem being integrated.

'They need food, tents, blankets. They need information, and legal help.

'But that's not all.

'They need to work, to earn their own money. They just need to have a normal life.'

You shake hands. Francois, head down, white hair moving in the breeze, walks away, working still to make a difference in this 'real world'.

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