

Notes from the Jungle 5. War and fences: Hamid's story.



Hamid, Afghanistan

'If I could say one thing to the UK government I would say instead of spending so much money on fences and police*, spend it on refugees instead.

**this summer, the UK spent £17m on increasing the size of fences, and deploying riot police and dogs at Calais. The ongoing wage bill will of course rise the longer the policy continues.*

'That will be much better, because people will still try to cross the fences, and some of them will succeed. And it means the UK government will have to keep spending this money, and because the fences will still be crossed, it will be for nothing. The money will be spent on nothing at all.

'I lived in England. My whole family – my parents and me, as well as my brothers – had come to England in 2003, to escape the war in Afghanistan. My parents were allowed to stay in England, but when I was 18, in 2008, after we had all been in England for five years, I was refused a visa. That is when I went back to Afghanistan.

'When I returned to Afghanistan, I started working with American troops as an interpreter. But I couldn't stay, because the Taliban was getting stronger and the details of Afghani people like me were being stolen, and then those people were hunted.

'The Taliban said they were traitors for working with America, but I was not a traitor. I worked for what was best for my country, and what is best for Afghanistan is not the Taliban. But because the Americans did not keep details safely, I saw and heard of people being kidnapped.

'Some were tortured, some were killed. I did not want that to happen to me. So, I ran away.

'I worked with the Americans for two years. I did not fight, but I risked my life because I was with them while fighting happened and also it was a risk to me just to work with them because Taliban supporters and members could find out what I was doing.

'Of course, they paid me. But there is not enough money to risk your life. You have to believe that what you do is right, for that. I thought it was the right thing to do, to oppose the Taliban. But it was too dangerous to continue, so I ran.

'In 2010, I crossed over land to Turkey, and then by boat to Greece. I reached Italy and they accepted my asylum request, but after five years – this year – my status ran out. I do not know why, because things are not better in Afghanistan now. In fact, for people like me who helped the UK and Americans, it is worse, because the Taliban may come into power again when the soldiers leave. Then, we would be hunted and captured.

'Without legal papers, I could not work in Italy, and without work I could not stay there. I could not go back to Afghanistan, so I had to come here. My only chance is to get to England, where I have lived before, and where I have family. It is all that is left for me now.

'I have been here two weeks. It is horrible. The living conditions are awful. The police are strict and will not let you try to get money or a job. They have also started to take people to deportation centres from here, where they stay for five to 45 days. But they let people out in Lyon or Toulouse and then they come back here. Where else can they go to?

'In my case, it is frustrating and sad. I know that there are empty homes in England, where we could live. But at the moment we have to live in tents. It is not right.

'I speak five languages. I have friends and family in England. I do not want to rely on an allowance from the government, on hand-outs or benefits. Most people do not want that, and like me they would not have to. We can work hard and we want to. It's better for the UK government to let us come and work.

'There are high numbers of people here. They need a safe place to live. They need a chance. They can work hard and they will. What is the alternative? Keep spending money on fences and police? What happens when the money runs out?

'What happens if people in the UK stop donating food and clothes? People will die. They do not deserve that – no-one does.

'It is no good pretending that people are not here, or that they do not need somewhere to live. We are here, and we do.

'It is no good pretending that people here can go home. If we could be at home we would be. And it is no good to say we do not want to work or we will not. We can and we do want to. The government must deal with the real things, not the things it imagines.

'Spending money on fences is stupid. Spend it on dealing with the problem here, spend it on people. The reward will be that they will work hard and pay taxes. We want to work. We can.

'People here are really suffering. Children, pregnant women. It does not make sense and it is not fair not to help them.'

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