

Dear Friends

## ARE WE ALL SEEKING SANCTUARY ?

Just as new lock-downs are being announced, it feels as if many of us are having to find ways of living with the Covid pandemic. These often involve making difficult sacrifices and discovering ways of dealing with so many types of loss and bereavement. Just as our lives are turned upside down we might find a glimpse of what it feels like to suffer the losses and traumas faced by refugees seeking sanctuary. And for many refugees, particularly those awaiting decisions on their claim, life is particularly challenging. The recently-announced 3p per week increase in the asylum seeker subsistence allowance is nothing less than an insult. The weekly amount is now to be £39.63; 14 years ago it was £40.22.

## MAY THEY REST IN PEACE

in this month of November, at a time when the thoughts of many turn to remembering loved ones who have died, our thoughts this month are dominated by the tragic deaths of refugees trying to cross the Channel in dangerous conditions. First we heard of a corpse found on the beach at Sangatte near Calais on Sunday 18 October. Initially known only as 'BB' the deceased was eventually identified as Behzad Bagheri-Parvin, an Iranian due to celebrate his 32<sup>nd</sup> birthday on 12 November.

And on Tuesday 27 October there was the tragic drowning of a family of five (**pictured [here](#)**) of Kurdish/Iranian origin from the city of Sardasht in western Iran, near the border with Iraq. Rasoul Iran-Nejad, 35, his wife Shiva Mohammad Panahi, 35 and their children Anita, nine, and Armin, six, were crossing from France to the UK in an overcrowded small boat that set off into rough seas and soon capsized in the Dunkirk Channel. The body of their younger son, 15-month-old Artin, is yet to be recovered, as are those of two additional adults thought to have been on the boat.

The Bishop of Dover, Rt Revd Rose Hudson-Wilkin, spoke for many when she said: 'My heart is full of sadness. We cannot stand by while those who seek refuge and safety are dying at the hands of those who exploit them and their hope. Children and their families are being washed away just miles from our shores. We must do more to help our fellow sisters, brothers, sons and daughters seek safe haven and be offered the same chances to live their lives as we do, with peace and love.'

## HONOURING THE DEAD

At Seeking Sanctuary, our hearts go out to their families and loved ones. Like others, we have pledged to lay flowers at the memorial on the Dover seafront after every death of this nature. After the intolerant words of the Home Secretary we were

grateful that our simple act of remembrance was filmed for the BBC and ITV news programmes, and our simple act of humanity was also covered by other media outlets. On the evening of 30 October, Kent Action Against Racism organised a candlelit vigil which drew over 50 people to the memorial on the seafront at Dover – a true action of solidarity. (See [photo](#) and [video](#) in press reports.) We cannot imagine the desperation which leads parents to make such agonising choices about their family's future.

In response to the so called 'words of sympathy' from official sources we have a simple message – forget walls and fences and security guards and instead devise ways for people to apply for asylum in the UK in safe and legal ways, and so prevent these tragedies at source. And, by the way, despite the sympathy of many individuals it's wrong to see France as a safe country – certainly not when the State ensures that riot police harass refugees every day and bar their access to the most basic amenities from the moment that they come across a spot in Calais where they might find shelter and rest.

You will be aware that the costs of a dignified and respectful funeral cannot usually be met by the family concerned. Our colleagues in Calais – Secours Catholique – have made an appeal to initially cover funeral costs for BB who was laid to rest in Calais on Tuesday 27 October. The sum that needs to be found is €2130. At the end of this update you will find details of the account in France to which money can be transferred: if this is too complicated, Ben will be happy to receive your donation for conversion to euros and transmission to France. His account details are also shown below.

#### ACCOMMODATION IN KENT

The British Army has used land at Shorncliffe near Folkestone since 1794. with the permanent barracks buildings dating from 1890. In 1803, Sir John Moore trained the first Light Infantry Division at Shorncliffe to fight in the Napoleonic Wars. His 'Shorncliffe System' yielded military methods from which the modern British Army developed. In the twentieth century it was a vital staging post for troops gathering for service on the continent in the two World Wars. Three recipients of the Victoria Cross are buried in the nearby cemetery.

Large parts of the site have been prepared for sale to civilian developers over the past twenty years and there are no longer any significant numbers of active military staff living there. Other units come for temporary stays when training. One set of buildings, Napier Barracks, is now housing asylum seekers while their claims are assessed. These are young men previously placed in some of the 90+ hotels used as contingency accommodation this year. The eventual capacity will be up to 400.

Within a couple of weeks of the first refugees arriving, ugly scenes started at a result of anti-migrant demonstrators visiting daily outside the gates. As a consequence various local groups decided to demonstrate a more friendly stance.

An hour's 'Welcome Event' held outside the barracks on Saturday 17 October attracted more than 300 supporters. There were heart-warming placards and banners on display, and many chants, songs and cheers sounded out to welcome the newcomers, who also showed up in the barracks courtyard with their own messages in response. Despite the wire fence surrounding the site, all were connected by their common humanity, and even with mask wearing and attempts at social distancing, the mood was one of pure celebration and solidarity. **(See [here](#) and [here](#).)** A strong police presence kept a few dozen protestors some distance away until the welcome party broke up.

A message was received, saying: 'I am a resident of Napier Barracks, and I felt very satisfied with everyone who came to welcome us. You broke the barrier of fear and anxiety that we had. You made us feel welcome in your beautiful town. Thank you all from the bottom of the heart.'

In the outside communities a number of local initiatives are getting started at gathering supplies for the asylum seekers. As the season changes, bedding very much appreciated and there are repeated requests for toilet paper. The government logistics and procurement operations seem to be as haphazard here as they have been in some of the efforts to counter the Covid pandemic. Because meals are provided the unit has been classed as "full board" and no allowance is provided for the cost of essential sundries such toiletries, hand sanitiser, non-prescription medicines, phone calls and bus fares, despite demands to keep in touch with solicitors and travel to the checks and interviews that are part of the asylum system.

But there is good news! After a long legal battle, refugee charities were told at the end of October that payments of £3 per week for clothing will be made (backdated to March) and £4.70 per week for travel needs (backdated to July), in light of Covid restrictions that were in place before that.

## CRITICAL REPORTS

The Red Cross points out that military premises are totally inappropriate for housing many asylum seekers, who have fled unimaginable horrors, including conflict, persecution, and imprisonment in their home countries. Poor communication during transfers to Shorncliffe led to many panic, believing that they were being readied for deportation. Others fear that the 200-year-old and run-down buildings, vacant for a number of years, are unsuited to Covid-proof life, with up to 14 beds per room separated into 'cubicles' by hanging sheets and only one leaky toilet per 100

residents. (Was refurbishment left incomplete due to pressure to reduce the use of hotels?)

A confirmed case of Covid has left many residents literally confined to barracks.

The Children's Commissioner recently reported upon visits to the intake unit for new arrivals in the port of Dover. She has expressed serious concern for the welfare of young people who get stuck there, sleeping on the floor alongside adults for as long as two or three days while homes are found for them across the country, places in Kent having been filled. Another critical report emerged from the Chief Inspector of Prisons, whose staff had also visited reception facilities in Dover and Folkestone. Who, despite praise for the sympathetic attitude of staff, found the premises to be "very poorly equipped to meet their purpose".

With our appreciation of your continued concern,

Phil & Ben.

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#### BANK DETAILS FOR FUNERAL DONATIONS

##### Secours Catholique

Account name "Sécours Catholique, Délégation du Pas de Calais"

Bank: Société Générale

Account number: 30003 01678 00050014638 50

Swift Code: SOGEFRPP

IBAN: FR76 3000 3016 7800 0500 1463 850

##### Ben Bano

Account name: B W Bano

Bank: Halifax

Sort code: 11 02 32

Account Number: 00490105

Reference: Calais Funeral

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**'Seeking Sanctuary' aims to raise awareness about people displaced from their homes and to channel basic humanitarian assistance from Faith Communities and Community Organisations via partnerships with experienced aid workers. Our special concern is for the 2000 or so exiles who are stuck in north-western France, mistakenly expecting a welcome in the UK.**

They need food, water, good counsel and clothes, which are accepted, sorted and distributed by several organisations, including two Calais warehouses which also supply needs further afield.

Further information from Ben Bano on 07887 651117 or Phil Kerton on 01474 873802. See *our latest news* at [www.seekingsanctuary.weebly.com](http://www.seekingsanctuary.weebly.com)