

May update from Seeking Sanctuary opens with a message from Pope Francis

'This is the time to dream together, this as a single human family, as fellow travellers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth, which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all' (Fratelli Tutti, 8).

When is an asylum seeker a trafficker?

The Guardian reports that an Iranian man, Fouad Kakaei, who took over steering a boat 'because he didn't want to die' was jailed and spent 17 months in prison before his conviction was overturned. To date the Home Office has prosecuted asylum seekers forced to take a turn in piloting boats. This original verdict was overturned in March 2021 – a retrial took place, and he was acquitted. The obvious argument in gaining the acquittal was that those on the boat did not plan to disembark and enter without respecting the law: like so many others they were hoping to be rescued at sea. It is hoped that others convicted of similar offences will have their cases reviewed.

Countering the narrative of the 'illegals'

Once again, we make the point – and we ask you to make a similar point, that to board a boat to cross the Channel in the hope of being rescued is not an illegal act. We cannot imagine how it feels to put your lives at risk in small boats on the open sea. But we can be quite sure that for the majority of those struggling for hours, the sight of a rescue vessel where they can claim asylum is much more attractive than pressing on to attempt a landing and try to exercise their legal right to claim asylum. (An act recently declared illegal by the UK despite the fact that it cannot be claimed in another country.) Hence, we prefer the term 'irregular' to 'illegal'.

Black Lives do matter ...

Ben has been reflecting on the relevance of our work to the controversial recent report on racial equality in the UK. Over many years we have done our best to highlight the lack of rights and the discrimination faced by those seeking sanctuary. But have we missed something in focusing our efforts on raising awareness? Ben was told about the abuse suffered by a group of young Eritrean refugees outside a supermarket in Kent, becoming even more telling when they tried to attend a local football match. It made him realise that some those seeking asylum not only have to contend with trauma and marginalisation, but with direct experience of racial abuse. Our sisters and brothers seeking sanctuary are all too readily targets of racial discrimination and abuse. Faith Communities and other organisations do sterling work already – but we all need to understand the impact on migrants – destitution, racism, marginalisation as well as trauma.

And still, they keep coming ...

In spite of £34 million outlay, the appointment of a migrant crossing 'supremo' and £98 million spent on previous security measures, the boats keep coming across the Channel, particularly in the milder Spring weather. An interesting article in the Guardian points to the growing blurring of roles between migrants and traffickers as desperate people seeking sanctuary are forced to aid smugglers in preparing boats for the Channel crossing in return for cheaper crossings. And the smugglers get more sophisticated in response to UK tactics.

There is little doubt that the termination of the Dublin agreement has left people even more desperate to be reunited with their families by using irregular means. (Note our use of the term 'irregular; rather than 'illegal' which describes their situation more accurately as they have no safe or legal way of claiming asylum in the UK.) And the Home Office finds itself in further difficulty owing to the impossibility of returning migrants to Europe without the provisions of the Dublin agreement and no agreements from EU countries to accept returns.

Over the last week several boatloads have arrived in Kent. No doubt this puts strain on services but compare this to the situation over the last week the tiny Italian island of Lampedusa where more than 2000 migrants have arrived – most from sub-Saharan Africa as well as from Syria. The list of 'no hope' countries is growing – in addition to the Sahel, atrocities are being witnessed in the Tigray region where 3 million civilians are under attack, meaning that the flow of refugees will be even greater. And between January and April this year there have been 360 deaths. Will the UK offer solidarity by providing assistance in this unprecedented situation? Very unlikely.

Pushback – a Europe wide phenomenon

A recent critical report from the Council of Europe highlights the increasing and dangerous practice of pushback – forcing migrants back across the border when they try to enter a country. The authorities in Hungary, Greece, Slovenia and Italy are among those accused of pushing migrants back to avoid asylum claims. In particular, the Human Rights Commissioner of the Council of Europe has highlighted Greece as one of the main culprits in pushing back migrants trying to enter from Turkey. There are disturbing reports that the French authorities are doing the same at the Italian border. The UK narrative of pushing back migrants across the Channel is just part of a much wider European problem.

'We are not safe until everyone is vaccinated ...'

We entirely agree, but we are aware of the millions living in war torn areas across the world, for example in Syria, the Sahel or the Congo, who have no chance of being vaccinated. And nearer to home, those living rough in Calais and who are unregistered have difficulty getting vaccinated. And nearer to home, what about those in the UK who are worried that their personal details supplied to vaccination clinics could be passed on and lead to their deportation? And those who are afraid to report that they have tested positive for Covid in case their details are passed to the Home Office? This is an issue which needs to be addressed if those most at risk are to be protected.

Mental Health Awareness Week

Mental Health Awareness Week is marked this month. It's timely to note that research suggests that asylum seekers are five times more likely to have mental health needs than the general population and more than 60% will experience serious mental distress. The incidence of PTSD is also significant, given the trauma experienced when they suffer the effects of war and persecution as well as the trauma in making difficult and dangerous journeys and having to cross borders in the face of a hostile reception, not to mention finding the prospect of being destitute in the UK. As we work towards better mental health services for all, particularly in the Covid pandemic, let us remember to advocate for a comprehensive and culturally sensitive service for all the migrants who require it, particularly since many refused asylum seekers are not eligible for most secondary medical care (except in Scotland and Wales).

Academic studies in Sweden have found that psychological damage is approximately twice as common among immigrants than in the native population – and three times more prevalent among asylum seekers.

Joint response to government proposals by over 60 faith-based organisations

We were pleased to be able to participate in this joint response from numerous people of Faith to the government consultation on new proposals for managing the asylum system. The response points out that we should treat asylum seekers with dignity, which means addressing their problems as individuals. We cannot neatly label all asylum seekers in the same manner; each person's situation is different, and a streamlined plan for immigration cannot be flexible enough to assess and address the complexity of their issues.

If the Home Secretary's proposals become law, undocumented entry to the UK will be criminalised, with penalties for those falling foul of the new legislation. In practice, this will mean that it will be impossible for most people to claim asylum because "safe and legal" to reach the UK and make a claim are extremely limited because of our island geography and "acceptable" routes under the proposals could never feasibly be made available to all who need them.

Criminalising people for seeking sanctuary seems perverse. In a modern and enlightened society, the dignity and humanity of each individual should be central, following any alternative theme ignores the many benefits of welcoming refugees and is likely to create a divisive culture in our communities.

Meanwhile, in France ...

Sad to say, conditions near the French coast show no signs of improvement. We will not yet again repeat the details of both petty and violent discrimination: the repeated evictions from rudimentary open-air camps, lack of food and water, barring from certain streets, difficulty in accessing medical care, showers and sanitation, and shortages of clothes – all ameliorated by the dogged efforts of volunteers.

Instead, we describe yet another tragic death, in some ways similar to that of two-year-old Mawda three years ago this week.

On 3 May, a number of organisations supporting exiles wrote a statement to express support for the complaint against the police filed by Rupak Hazhar in February, blaming them for the death of her new-born daughter a few months earlier.

On the night of 1-2 September 2020, the Kurdish-Iraqi couple Rupak and Hazhar Sharif, with their children aged 10 and 2, were detained by police along with a dozen others on the shore between Calais and Dunkirk. They were held outdoors for several hours, forbidden to leave, before being freed.

Rupak was in the eighth month of a normal pregnancy, monitored by the local hospital. Later, she told a passing a police patrol that she had been in severe pain when detained and that her waters had broken. Five hours after her arrest, she was eventually taken to hospital by ambulance for an emergency Caesarean section. Her child, Aleksandra, was placed in intensive care, being unable to breath without

assistance ,and was allowed to die three days later. She is buried in the Muslim section of the Calais cemetery; her family are in London waiting for their asylum claims to be processed. Rupak has said that she wants the truth to come out to save others from suffering the same trauma.

Officials maintain that "none of the migrants mentioned any particular difficulties" at the time. However, the General Inspectorate of the National Police has started investigations, considering a possible criminal offence of failing to provide help.

A Last Word, from Glasgow ...

Staff from Immigration Enforcement detained two men during a dawn raid in a mainly Muslim area on the first day of Eid – a festival devoted to peaceful celebration. By mid-morning, a crowd of about 200 residents had surrounded their vehicle, preventing it from driving away, and chanting “these are our neighbours, let them go”, one of them lying under the van. Police intervened to ensure their release. Nicola Sturgeon tweeted: “I am proud to represent a constituency and lead a country that welcomes and shows support to asylum seekers and refugees.”

Scotland relies on immigrants to offset the pressures of depopulation and on the same day new MSPs were sworn into a diverse parliament, taking their oaths in British Sign Language, Arabic, Urdu, Punjabi, Doric, Scots, Gaelic, Welsh and Orcadian - not to mention English.



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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