Facing adversity together: stowaways and helpers in Sangatte

by Henri Courau

Since its opening in 1999, more than 55,000 people have passed through Sangatte.

Designed to house 800 people, in mid 2002 it accommodated some 1,300 people with irregular status. Of the 50 or so nationalities represented, the group of Iraqi Kurds is the largest, followed by Afghans and Iranians. The weekly influx of 500 arrivals varies according to the world situation. 95% of the residents of Sangatte are single men, their average age 23 years. Many left home at the bidding of their families, fleeing human rights abuses. They are free to come and go as they wish. Only the *'sans papier'* are allowed to enter the camp; security personnel exclude all journalists, photographers, sightseers and weapons.

Sangatte is the final stop before the migrants' journey to England – the Eldorado which has beckoned through the months and years they have been travelling. Most have spent between £5,000-£10,000, been repeatedly stopped at borders, frequently had to retrace their steps and often been imprisoned. They have become accustomed to preserving their anonymity. On arrival in Sangatte they never divulge their real names.

The account related to me by an Arab Iraqi doctor is typical. Fleeing persecution by the regime of Saddam Hussein, for six months he hid in the roof of a school in Iraq, surviving on rice and biscuits, his only entertainment the lessons of the children below. Each night he would emerge, waiting for the chance to slip across the border to Turkey. Now, like all the rest, he leaves Sangatte each night to try his luck again.

Whether they can be termed political refugees or economic migrants is hard to tell. All have escaped from their country of origin in pursuit of a better, safer future. Their oft-repeated desire is to "live as a normal person". For them England is wrapped in a paradisiacal halo: *"The British, they give you hotel, good food, people happy to receive you… Tony Blair is waiting for us".*

The large group of unaccompanied minors in Sangatte represents a particular burden for the French Red Cross, which runs the camp. The Red Cross is legally responsible for those under the age of eighteen. Hardly any of the 250 minors declare themselves as such and try to persuade reception staff that they are adults. Frequently, however, when asked for their year of birth they give themselves away.

Inside Sangatte

Sangatte is a warehouse of 25,000 square metres. Previously used during the construction of the Eurotunnel, it has been requisitioned by the French government to house migrants attempting to cross the Channel, rather than leaving them to sleep in the streets of Calais. Inside, migrants live in tents or, for the more fortunate, cabins.

The hub of social life in Sangatte tends to be the informal market organised by migrants, which provides food and items not available from the Red Cross. Unlucky men, returning hungry after unsuccessful nights, console themselves with sandwiches, bottled drinks, biscuits, nuts, cakes and cigarettes. Pens, phone cards and shortwave radios also change hands in 'Middle Town', the name the migrants give to the large open space in the middle of the Sangatte hangar. Away from the eyes of the staff, one can find other items for sale: blankets, beds, clothes, shoes, a clean set of sterile clothes distributed for those who have scabies, or a coveted place in a cabin. Bets can be placed on the outcome of football or volleyball matches organised by the migrants of different nationalities.

'Middle Town' is adjacent to the Red Cross offices, the canteen, clinic and washing block. Children play, while men watch French television, joke, haggle and trade. Many of the goods on sale have been passed through holes in the walls of the hangar to escape detection by the security authorities at the gate.

England at all costs

In late afternoon the daily dance begins. Dozens of people file out of the gate hiding about their persons the Red Cross blankets they will use for protection against the cold and the electrified barbed wire, some biscuits and coca-cola for the journey, a bottle in which to urinate in case they are confined in a truck for a long time. Many wear several pairs of trousers, shirts and sweaters, carrying in their backpacks all their worldly possessions. They plan to discard the soiled outer layer of clothing in order to present a neat appearance on arrival in England.

By ten at night the first of the 'taxi police', the name the migrants give to the police vans, arrive at Sangatte and disgorge those caught before they have boarded a truck. They shrug philosophically. *"No chance today, police control very strong. Tomorrow, inshaalah!"*

The crossing of the channel becomes ever more complicated as French railway officials, the police, the Calais harbour authorities and the shipping companies devise increasingly rigorous controls and stratagems to uncover the law breakers. The migrants regard football matches as one of the best opportunities to cross undetected, as French police are known to remain glued to their small screens.

Smugglers

After a while it is easy to recognise the people smugglers. They live in Sangatte but do not eat in the canteen, have mobile phones and are the only ones to return from Calais harbour often and with smiles on their faces. Most have papers legalising their status in the UK or a Schengen country. Connected to transnational smuggling networks, they

employ agents within the camp who pick out potentially wealthy arrivals. They are forever on the lookout for businessmen, educated people and traders able to fork out the £300-£700 demanded for a passage to England.

The migrants consider the smugglers the lowest of the low. Smugglers escort clients to the trucks and can at times go out of their way to help them. One was said to have helped a migrant in a wheelchair get to England at no charge. But for the most part they are without scruples and do not hesitate to dispose of those who threaten their interests, even if means sending them to England without making money out of them.

Each national group of smugglers has its own territory. Calais harbour is the domain of the Kurds and is vigorously defended against the Afghans, with whom there was a major confrontation in May. The tunnel is open to all, a place of menace with terrifying dogs and electrified barriers and the risk of either being killed by a passing train or thrown from the train they have managed to board.

Tryggve Sorvaag/Panos Pictures

Warning sign on fence surrounding Eurostar terminal, Calais, France. April 2002.

The French Red Cross

The French Red Cross maintains a team of social workers to assist any migrants wishing to apply for asylum in France. The social workers regularly attend training sessions and hold seminars about asylum procedures. They spend a considerable amount of time chatting with people, trying to defuse tensions, assisting the most vulnerable residents and providing a link between the migrants and the camp management. They have, however, few opportunities to provide asylum counselling. A mere 400 people, 0.8% of the total number passing through Sangatte, have applied to remain in France. Many of these claimants abandon their claims and go to England and, if the UK rejects them, are subsequently unable to return to France or any other Schengen state.

The Red Cross has no previous experience of managing a facility such as Sangatte; indeed, it is unprecedented in the entire history of the modern institution of asylum. Working there is highly stressful. Rumours about what is to happen to the centre and the plans of the authorities are constantly circulating. The staff and the Red Cross are vulnerable to the misrepresentations, lies and innuendo of the media. Situated as it is at the crossroads of Europe, the camp is constantly in the limelight. Easy transport links to Paris, London and Brussels mean that journalists and photographers are always as the gate, pestering staff to let them in.

Professional and personal tensions are rife within management and various teams of staff. Complaints, backstabbing and score-settling are common. On my first day in Sangatte when I asked a colleague for advice I was told: *"If you have any ideas, just forget them."* It was disappointing to see how a group of humanitarian workers could become so embittered.

For the staff, any initial illusions that refugees are docile and grateful recipients of assistance give away to compassion fatigue. Many come to regard refugees as inherently dishonest and subversive. When tempers flare it is common to hear the migrants exclaim: *"Hey! We are not animals!"* Once I witnessed the refusal of migrants to vacate their cabin so that it could be cleaned. Fearing that they would be expelled from their cabin, they met the insistence of the staff with a volley of standard French insults. The conflict escalated and a staff member snapped back with the retort: *"I like Saddam Hussein!"*

Gift and power

Legal and illegal activities establish the power relations within the camp. Aside from the power that the Red Cross officials wield over the migrants, the migrants themselves are stratified according to who receive items from the staff and who do not. A similar hierarchy has emerged among the staff. These three axes of power — between the Red Cross and the migrants, and within the circles of the migrants and the staff — are thus shaped by the relations of giving, withholding and receiving. It shapes the way each group represents and misunderstands the other, with instability and reversal of authority a constant risk.

The two populations, helpers and migrants, never have the time or the opportunity to get know each other or to weave social links. The migrants have their own management system, shaped by their needs and their burning desire to reach England and leave France, but it is regarded as illegal by the Red Cross. For the Red Cross officials, life goes on. The migrants remain travellers, nomads, driven by the same hopes as the thousands who have passed through Sangatte before them.

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