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For immediate release

** Version française ci-dessous **

Tragic disappearance of woman at UK border is a symptom of wider problem: Lack of access to legal routes of passage must be addressed

On Friday 9th August, news was received that a woman previously supported by the Refugee Women's Centre in Dunkirk had gone missing whilst crossing the Channel from France to the UK. Three of the twenty people on the boat were reported to have gone overboard by HM Coastguard. Two were rescued, but this woman's body was not found. She is the first person known to have disappeared, presumed dead, in the Channel attempting to seek asylum in the UK.

The exact circumstances of this woman's disappearance are not known. What is evident, however, is that along with many other prospective asylum seekers living in the camps around Calais and Dunkirk, this woman was left with no safe route to seek asylum in the UK. Faced with degrading, unsanitary and unsafe living conditions, coupled with the striking lack of safe and legal routes to seek asylum in the UK, has led to an escalation in the risks that the displaced community in Northern France are prepared to take.

Inhumane conditions and lack of safe routes

Currently, there are an estimated 900 people living rough in informal settlements around Grande-Synthe, near to Dunkirk. Many individuals, including the woman who is presumed to have lost her life in the Channel earlier this month, sleep inside a dirty and crowded gymnasium opened as temporary shelter by the local mayor. Others, including families and young children, are left to sleep in poor-quality tents outside. A French Supreme Court decision in June this year ordered the state to put in place access to showers, toilets and water points for refugees in Grande Synthe, as well as access to relevant legal rights information through flyers in people's native languages. This follows a court ruling in June 2017 that found that the living conditions in camps around Calais constituted "inhuman and degrading treatment" for those living there.

The situation on the ground, however, has become no less desperate. People's rights to shelter, sanitation, health, asylum and information in their own language are violated on a daily basis – to name only a few. Women are particularly hard hit, with no stable shelter, limited access to sexual and reproductive health services and poor protection from exploitation. Unsurprisingly, individuals in the area are becoming increasingly desperate to escape their predicament in Northern France, which appears to have led to an escalation in the risks that individuals take in order to seek sanctuary in the UK.



Gymnasium shelter in Grande-Synthe, summer 2019. Credit – Help Refugees

Frances Timberlake, Refugee Women's Centre, said: "We are sickened, sad and angry. First and foremost, our thoughts go out to this woman's family and friends. Their shock and grief will be felt acutely. We remember the five other people reported to have died or been killed at this border so far this year, and the 209 others since 1997, as a result of hostile living conditions, police violence and brutal border policies. In response to this recent incident a spokesperson from the UK Home Office said that "crossing the Channel in a small boat is a huge risk." We agree. But we refuse for the blame to be put on individuals making this journey and we demand safe and legal routes to be re-opened. Refugee lives are not disposable."

Maddy Allen, Field Manager at Help Refugees, said: "In the last year we have seen a rise in the number of women, men and children attempting to reach the UK by dangerous boat journeys across the Channel. This has not happened in a void. Following extra funding agreements from the UK government towards the harsh security and surveillance measures on the ground in Calais and Dunkirk, the routes undertaken to reach safety are increasingly dangerous. The recent situation of the Channel boats must not be used as an excuse to clamp down hard on innocent people. The UK must co-operate with the French to bring positive solutions for all parties and make sure that we are using the principles of justice and humanity to consider each and every displaced person with the dignity they deserve."

Marta Welander, Executive Director at Refugee Rights Europe, said: "We deeply lament the most recent disappearance at the UK border. Heightened border security has been accompanied by increased hostility by the French state towards displaced individuals in the area, taking the shape of high levels of police harassment, intimidation, violence and frequent evictions from living spaces. The lack of safe and legal routes for displaced persons to seek asylum in the UK has led to an escalation in the risks that individuals take, and we call on the UK government to urgently provide expanded safe and legal routes to prevent future tragedies."

Background: Britain's juxtaposed border arrangements

- The juxtaposed border arrangements leave prospective asylum seekers to the UK without a mechanism to file their asylum claim; a right which is enshrined under international law.
- Legal means are only accessible to a very small minority who fit specific criteria. For example, a minority of individuals may be eligible for family reunification via the Dublin protocols. Yet this only applies within very narrow parameters, your partner in the UK must either have humanitarian protection or refugee status or in the case of parents in the UK, the applicant must be under the age of 18.
- For minors there are two legal routes available. Either, via family reunification or via the Dubs Amendment. Yet these can be immensely complex processes to navigate and waiting times are lengthy. The UK's family reunification policies are also restrictive – based upon concepts of the nuclear family. Over the age of 18 you are unable to apply for younger siblings join you and unaccompanied children are unable to apply to bring their parents to the UK.

Signatories:

Refugee Women's Centre
Help Refugees
Refugee Rights Europe
Doctors of the World / Medecins du Monde
Refugee Community Kitchen
Refugee Info Bus
First Aid Support Team (FAST)
MRAP

L'Auberge des Migrants
Salam Nord / Pas de Calais
Emmaus
La Cabane Juridique
Ligue des Droits de l'Homme
Bethlehem
ACCMV
Sourire Aide Vie Espoir (SAVE)

Disparition tragique d'une femme à la frontière soulève un plus large problème : il est urgent de prendre en main le problème du manque de voies légales et sûres

Vendredi 9 août, une femme soutenue par le Refugee Women's Centre à Dunkerque a été portée disparue en tentant de passer la frontière entre la France et le Royaume-Uni. Selon les gardes-côtes britanniques, trois personnes parmi la vingtaine présente sur le bateau sont passées par-dessus bord. Deux ont pu être secourues. Le corps de cette femme n'a pas été retrouvé. Elle est la première personne reconnue disparue, avec des chances de survie quasi inexistantes, dans la Manche en essayant de chercher l'asile au Royaume-Uni.

Les circonstances exactes de sa disparition ne sont pas connues. Ce qui est connu en revanche, c'est que cette femme n'a pas pu se tourner vers des moyens sûrs pour demander l'asile et rejoindre le Royaume-Uni, comme de nombreuses personnes présentes dans les camps entre Calais et Dunkerque. Les conditions de vie dégradantes, insalubres et dangereuses conjuguées au manque de voies sûres et légales pour demander l'asile au Royaume-Uni mènent les populations en exil dans le nord de la France à prendre des risques de plus en plus importants.

Conditions de vie inhumaines et manque de routes sûres

On estime actuellement que 900 personnes vivent dans des camps informels dans la région de Grande-Synthe. Beaucoup d'entre elles, notamment la femme ayant disparue dans la Manche plus tôt ce mois-ci, dorment à l'intérieur d'un gymnase surpeuplé ouvert temporairement comme abri par la mairie. D'autres, y compris des familles et des jeunes enfants, dorment à l'extérieur dans des tentes de mauvaise qualité. Le Conseil d'Etat a rendu une décision en juin dernier demandant à l'Etat français d'assurer l'accès à des douches, toilettes et points d'eau à Grande-Synthe, ainsi que l'information effective par flyers de leurs droits dans la langue natale des personnes. Cela fait suite à l'ordonnance de juin 2017 qui qualifie les conditions de vie dans les camps de Calais comme un "traitement inhumain et dégradant" des personnes.

La situation sur le terrain n'en reste pas moins compliquée. Les droits d'accès à un hébergement, à la santé et à l'information par les personnes qui parlent leur langue, pour n'en citer que quelques-uns, sont régulièrement ignorés. Les femmes sont particulièrement vulnérables. Elles ont un accès très limité aux services de santé sexuelle et reproductive et sont exposées à des systèmes d'exploitation. C'est donc sans surprise que les personnes vivant dans de telles conditions prennent des risques de plus en plus importants pour quitter le nord de la France.

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