

Neither safe nor sound: unaccompanied children in the North of France

Laurence Geai • Grand Reporter



In the European refugee and migrant’s crisis, one in three people seeking for refuge is a child. Among these children, there are unaccompanied children¹. There is no existing census of these children. Due to their great mobility, numbers are constantly evolving. We estimate that they are around 500, permanently present on the entire Channel coastline since the beginning of 2016. Still, these fragile children are not protected. The solutions suggested by public authorities in France are limited and inadequate. They live in unacceptable conditions (lack of food, no access to water, non-attendance to school). At the mercy of smugglers and adults, they are exposed to permanent dangers: accidents, injuries, and violence including sexual abuse.

An unaccompanied Afghan minor in the slum of Calais. Unaccompanied Afghan minors are the largest group on this coastline. In March 2016, between 100 and 200 unaccompanied Afghan children were estimated to be present in the area.

¹ “Unaccompanied minors are children aged of less than 18 years, that were separated from both of their parents and other close relatives and who are not taken care of by an adult invested with this responsibility by law or custom”, according to the definition of the European Council upon the Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)9 by the Committee of Ministers to the Member States on life projects for unaccompanied migrant minors, 12 July 2007. <http://infomie.net/spip.php?article189>

ALTERNATIVES HUMANITAIRES

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

3rd Issue – November 2016
p. 158-171

The photographer Laurence Geai went to Calais between February and May 2016 and investigated in the slum, with these isolated young persons decided to go to England. Her pictures make us recognize the harshness of the existence of these children, the risk they take and the urgent necessity of help. They remind us that they are children above all, and that the way we welcome them in our countries is a shared responsibility. Her coverage, associated to the sociological survey conducted by the association Trajectoires for UNICEF France², wants to document the situation of these young people: make them visible, to end the denial and to take appropriate measures according to their situation, their age and their fragility.



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Two young refugees living in the slum, are checking their mobile phones. The Calais slum, the “jungle”, is adjacent to the temporary accommodation center (CAP in French) constructed at the beginning of 2016.

² Olivier Peyroux, Alexandre Le Clève and Evangéline Masson Diez, *Ni sains ni saufs. Enquête sur les enfants non-accompagnés dans le Nord de la France*, Unicef et Trajectoires, June 2016, https://www.unicef.fr/sites/default/files/atoms/files/ni-sains-ni-saufs_mna_france_2016_0.pdf

ALTERNATIVES HUMANITAIRES

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p. 158-171

Ahmed, 16, Sudan. Ahmed left his parents who remained in Darfur and took the migration route passing through Libya. He has been living in the slum of Calais since five months.
His goal: arrive in England "to study science".



March 1st, 2016. Dismantling of the southern part of Calais' "jungle". This decision taken by public authorities to evacuate a part of the camp weakens even more unaccompanied children. The consequence of the dismantling without an appropriate solution: the relation with a certain number of these children is lost.

ALTERNATIVES HUMANITAIRES

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

3rd Issue – November 2016
p. 158-171



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Anouar (on the left), 16 years-old, from Egypt. Egyptians are a minority of migrants present in the Calais "jungle": there are between 20 or 50, and most of them are minors. Anouar has been living in Calais since four months with around ten other minors. He doesn't have family in England but he wants to go there. Associations of volunteers offer activities to these young people, like the creation of masks that the two boys are wearing here.

The Calais jungle shelters shops, restaurants, and here, the stall of a hairdresser.



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ALTERNATIVES HUMANITAIRES

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

3rd Issue – November 2016
p. 158-171



March 2016. Bahman, 17 years-old, from Afghanistan. Bahman accepted a space in a container of the temporary accommodation center (CAP in French) constructed at the beginning of 2016, adjacent to the slum.

Iyad, 11 years-old, from Syria. Iyad is from the Golan. He arrived in Calais, around six-months ago. He is alone; his parents are refugees in Lebanon. Other Syrians, also from the Golan, take care of him. An uncle might be expecting him in England and so the child is seeking to pass through. Since then, it would seem that his older brother, lost for a time during the journey, also arrived in Calais. For these Calais' children, everyday life is almost always spent outside and in groups, whether for playing, eating or showering.



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Minors, accompanied by young adults, will try to go to England by hopping on a lorry. Their strategy: to hide in a park, cut branches to block the motorway and force lorries to stop so they can get on the trailer. Most of them will probably disembark but it happens that one or two refugees can hide with the merchandise. Since more than five months young boys try to pass almost everyday. The injuries due to their crossing attempts are numerous. When they are not taken care of, they can get infected and leave important wounds. On September 16 2016, a young man, aged between 16 and 20 years old died struck by a vehicle on the harbour ring road. The newspaper *La Voix du Nord* reminded “it is the eighth death of migrants on the Calais harbour ring road or the A16 motorway since January 1st, 2016”.



The “Calais jungle” has been completely dismantled by the French State on 24 October 2016, despite the opposition of many associations, worried about the fate of migrants, carried in different centers located on the French territory.

To go further: migrant children blocked in Greece

51%: this is the proportion of children aged less than 18, composing the refugee population in the world in 2015, representing a 41% increase compared to 2009. More than 98,400 unaccompanied or separated children asked for asylum in 78 countries in 2015, most of them are Afghan, Eritrean, Somali or Syrian, this is the highest number since this data started to be analysed in 2006*.

In the spring 2016, when refugees and migrants blocked on the Greek islands, started to arrive in Turkey following the agreement between Ankara and the European Union, UNICEF reminded States of their obligation to take care of and protect all children while giving them the possibility to express themselves when their future is at risk. The new Greek law, entered into force last April 4th, excludes forced return or exceptional border procedures for some vulnerable groups such as unaccompanied or separated children, children with disabilities, victims of trauma or distress, pregnant women or women who have recently given birth. There is still a lot remaining to do.

During last spring, more than 22,000 refugees and migrant children blocked in Greece were confronted to an uncertain future and even to diverse types of detention since the application of the agreement. UNICEF wants the implementation of a coordinated procedure to protect the best interests of children and to satisfy their needs, meaning decent housing, health care, protection against human trafficking and sexual exploitation, according to international and European law. Due to their situation, children have particular reasons to benefit from international protection, in particular to escape forced marriage and the recruitment in armed forces. The European Commission has clearly stipulated that returns had to comply with international European law.

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*UNHCR, *Global Trends. Forced Displacement in 2015*, UNHCR, 20 June 2016, <http://www.unhcr.org/statistics/unhcrstats/576408cd7/unhcr-global-trends-2015.html>

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To quote this article: Laurence Geai, "**Neither safe nor sound: unaccompanied children in the North of France**", *Humanitarian Alternatives*, n° 3, November 2016, p. 158-171, <http://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2016/11/23/neither-safe-nor-sound-unaccompanied-children-in-the-north-of-france/>

ISBN of the article (PDF): 978-2-37704-157-2