

Of Refugees and Justice: the Calais evictions begin

By Mark Barwick, HRWF Policy Advisor (02.03.2016) - This week the French government demonstrated how a country of high-minded ideals can become numb to its own values. Authorities began to evict people living in the refugee camp near Calais, known as the Jungle. The prefecture of Calais had won a court battle to begin clearing large parts of the southern portion of the camp, where about 3500 people have taken up residence, including hundreds of children, most of whom are unaccompanied by any adult.

The eviction did not go smoothly. The French journal *Libération* carried the headline: 'The authorities had assured that the evacuation would take place without violence. This was not the case.' Indeed, there have been scuffles on all sides, some provoked by activists in defence of the refugees, political militants such as groups like 'No Borders' and the settlers themselves. But there has never been question of who has been in control.

Br Johannes, a monk who has been living among the refugees in Calais with a small group of other volunteers, had this to say on Monday of this week:

Today the police started with the forced demolition of the camp. It goes above my understanding how a government and a police force can decide to go into a camp where minors and children live and actually use teargas grenades in the areas where mothers with babies are.

Only shortly before, the Iranian Christians had asked me to sit in front of their houses together with them and to pray for them - ten minutes later teargas canisters were shot into the camp, some of these projectiles were used to 'shoot' people off of their houses. People were treated for the teargas by the staff of Doctors without Borders, who constantly stayed present in the camp.

Yes, some of the youngsters responded by throwing stones at the police, but the volunteers tried to calm the situation down. Many of those volunteers and people joined in to extinguish the fires that started in that part of the camp.

The south part of the camp however was severely damaged today; many houses with people's only possessions inside were destroyed and removed.

This is a sad day for the people in the camp, people who have run away from such violence, from war and conflict, from poverty and police violence. They are people and youngsters who already suffer trauma - I am ashamed today - I am ashamed to be a European.

Regardless of the legality of the action which was taken yesterday, French officials are responsible to ensure the safety and resettlement of the refugee population near Calais, giving particular attention to the most vulnerable among them. Their action may be juridically correct; whether it is humane is quite a different matter.

The authorities are also responsible for the facilitation of asylum procedures to go forward within a reasonable period of time. This has not happened, contributing to the toxic environment that exists today. Likewise, the UK government must step up the processing of visas for those who have family members in their country. This could help break the bottleneck of factors that are driving the chaotic situation at this time.