

Clandestine Migrants: the Traffickers' Toll

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Dozens of clandestine Kurdish and Iraqi migrants are currently vegetating in Cherbourg (Manche), in the hope of making their way to England. Housed under canvas in a makeshift camp, they are forced to pay the heavy toll of the traffickers, a daily cocktail of intimidation and harassment.

Around fifty clandestine migrants are gathered around the tables of the city council room this Wednesday, where associations have provided a breakfast of tea, milk and bread. Chilled to the marrow, haggard with fatigue, the men devour their meal. Conversation is limited and hushed. They are all making the most of this brief respite in the warm to regain the strength they lost the previous night, struggling for survival in their makeshift camp.

In a corner, six men are engaged in more energetic conversation, every so often casting a suspicious eye around the room. They were the first to arrive and will be the first to leave, without having touched the food placed in front of them. At the very most, they will have sipped a mouthful of milk or tea. *“If they haven’t swallowed a thing, it means they have already eaten,”* confides one of the volunteers.

Their lack of appetite betrays them: these are traffickers. Even though they are regarded as clandestine migrants themselves, they have no need for human aid organizations. They can eat their fill and dress in clean clothes. The traffickers have found the key to a life of comfort only dreamed of by other clandestine migrants.

In the camp, at the foot of Roule Mountain, the clandestine migrants of Cherbourg, most of them young men from Kurdistan, are all hoping to reach England, the mecca for refugees. Night after night they try their luck at the port, stowing away in lorries bound for the Channel and doing their utmost to avoid the police. Each one of them is aware of the cost of this dream, a price they have to pay in the camp every day: the cold and damp, the insalubrity and hunger, the boredom and waiting.

And the traffickers. The *“little dictators”*, to quote Father Paul Gaillard, of the migrant aid association Itinérance. *“The traffickers are never far away,”* he explains. *“They apply unremitting pressure, a surveillance that limits the refugees’ freedom of expression”* (see box below).

The migrants are not particularly forthcoming, having learnt to be wary of strangers on their journey to Cherbourg. They speak with reluctance, eager to be on their way. The traffickers are watching and the more talkative among them are quickly reduced to silence. The clandestine migrants are not an anarchic community. At the head of the organization, its leaders impose a law based on terror, threats and money.

Survival of the fittest

“The traffickers are criminals, thieves; they hit us and threaten us with knives”, says Tarik ¹, a 33 year-old Iraqi. Back in Baghdad he was a computer engineer but he fled the war in his country in order to join friends who had settled in Birmingham. At the outset, he had to pay 6000 euros to cross the Turkish border and reach Italy, stowed away inside a lorry and the hold of a boat. On the advice of his predecessors, he completed the journey by train.

He arrived in the Cotentin in early November but left the camp a month later following an operation. He was no longer physically capable of withstanding conditions there. A member of the association took him in and has been sheltering him ever since, illegally. His escape from the camp means that Tarik has also thrown off the traffickers’ iron rule. And the omerta they impose.

“You have to do as they say, otherwise they become violent. They are always asking for money, particularly from the most vulnerable. They’re after a comfortable life.” The traffickers don’t care whether their ‘clients’ manage to cross the Channel. All they are interested in is taking advantage of their own kind. *“They’re scum”* says Michel Le Cavorzin, Cherbourg’s police commissioner. *“The traffickers always give the same line, just in order to fleece the poor guys who’ve made it this far.”*

When Tarik first set foot in Cherbourg on his arrival from Paris, it was night-time. He had heard of the camp but did not know exactly where it was. After a few hours roaming the streets, the young Baghdadi came across two Kurds who showed him the way. The trafficker on duty was drunk. He indicated a tent where Tarik could sleep. It was only the next day, when he had sobered up, that he actually approached him. In order to claim the money that would enable him to stay. The “rent” came to 700 euros. Not to mention the clothes that were stolen that same day. Some time later, for no apparent reason, Tarik had to hand over the same sum yet again.

“They don’t deserve this money” the survivor continues calmly. *“They tell us they have contacts among the lorry drivers but it isn’t true. They took all my money when I was in the camp and went on asking for more even when I had nothing left. And it all gets spent on alcohol, grass and drugs.”* New arrivals with no money are immediately dismissed. Unless they have a friend in England who can put down a deposit with one of the traffickers’ accomplices. These guarantors are the ‘sponsors’, the admission ticket to the camp.

A number of African refugees who were thrown out of the camp on 12th December sent a written account to Paul Gaillard, confirming the pressure exerted by the traffickers. *“Life becomes really hard for refugees when members of their own kind start behaving like a ‘mafia’, taking over leadership of the whole group and extorting money from every new*

¹ The name has been changed.

arrival. [...] We are forbidden to tell anyone and they won't let us inform the associations or the police. If we disobey, they start by removing our blankets so that we get cold at night. Their next step is to throw people out of the camp and insist they leave Cherbourg for good – otherwise they'll knife them or threaten them with their lives."

Everything has a price

A *'mafia'*. This is also Tarik's opinion. The traffickers' gang is a well-oiled institution. The exile merchants are all Kurdish and take turns watching over the camp. Sometimes they sleep there. The rest of the time they enjoy the benefits of the apartments or squats they have found in Cherbourg. Tarik claims they are *"highly intelligent"* and have links with a network that stretches from the Place du Colonel Fabien in Paris to all the main cross-Channel ports: Calais, Dunkirk and Cherbourg.

So why don't the clandestine migrants rebel against such degrading treatment? *"Because we need them"* replies Tarik unhesitatingly. It is a paradoxical attitude: the migrants loathe and fear the traffickers and yet they are unwilling to break free. *"The refugees don't want to betray them because their fate is in the hands of their captors"* sums up Paul Gaillard.

According to him, it is the traffickers who are behind this law of silence. They have everything to gain from the immigrants' clandestinity, which means they can *"keep their business going"*. Tarik relates how the *'little dictators'* prevented the immigrants from visiting ACAU (the Association for the Coordination of Emergency Aid) for two weeks last November. This day center has catered for the homeless for the last four years, offering facilities for clandestine migrants to take a shower and get warm. The veto was levied with no explanation and obeyed to the letter. *"The traffickers don't want to show the police and population how many refugees there are in Cherbourg"* claims Tarik. *"They are afraid people may react and intervene in order to put an end to the situation."*

The associations are fighting a daily battle to help the clandestine population. They provide tents, blankets and tarpaulins and supply meals. They hope this will not only cater for their basic needs but encourage them to break free of the traffickers' hold. *"We know just what the problem is: the traffickers go behind our backs and charge for the services our associations provide for free"* bemoans Pascal Bésuelle from the Collective against Racism and Extreme Right-Wing Views. *"It's like a tithe on distress."* The cost of this tax is a closely-guarded secret: the rates are fixed unilaterally by these little lords.

The traffickers' operational mode is shrouded in mystery. How many of them are there in Cherbourg? How do they become traffickers? *"I reckon they are guys who have already proved themselves, who have managed to get across"* says Paul Gaillard. Tarik prefers to think they were initially just like the other clandestine migrants but then gradually realized there was a way to make maximum money with minimum effort. This explains why they are so determined to keep a hold on this lucrative market. And the new faces that appear at the camp every day encourage vocations.

On the wall of the room where the clandestine migrants are offered breakfast hangs a map of France, with the English coastline at its summit. This Wednesday a number of them are huddled in front of the planisphere, pointing to the British cities of their dreams: Poole, Portsmouth, Brighton... The names ring out like so many tokens of hope. Beside them sit the

traffickers. The much-admired map is positioned just above the table which is always reserved for them.

Ghosts lost in a legal black hole

Clandestine migrants cannot acquire legal 'refugee' status as defined in the 1951 Geneva Convention, because they have not applied for asylum to the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (OFPRA). Convinced the answer to their dreams lies over the Channel, the migrants have no wish to remain in France.

Furthermore, in accordance with international agreements, they cannot be forcibly deported because they come from countries or regions where their safety cannot not be guaranteed. If the police arrest them, they are released a few hours later. They then receive a letter from the French Prefecture which states that "*given current international circumstances, it is not possible to escort you back to the border. You are consequently requested to comply with this measure yourself and must leave French soil bound for any country into which you can be legally admitted, within one week from now at the latest.*" The injunction does however stipulate that this voluntary return to the home country must not encompass "*any country within the European Union*" because the clandestine migrants hold neither passport nor visa.

For the migrants, Cherbourg is a law-free zone in which they have no recognized legal identity. Tackled by associations who had asked him to intervene in order to put an end to the situation, the Prefect of the Manche, Jean-Louis Fargeas, responded by saying: "*What can one do for people who don't exist?*".