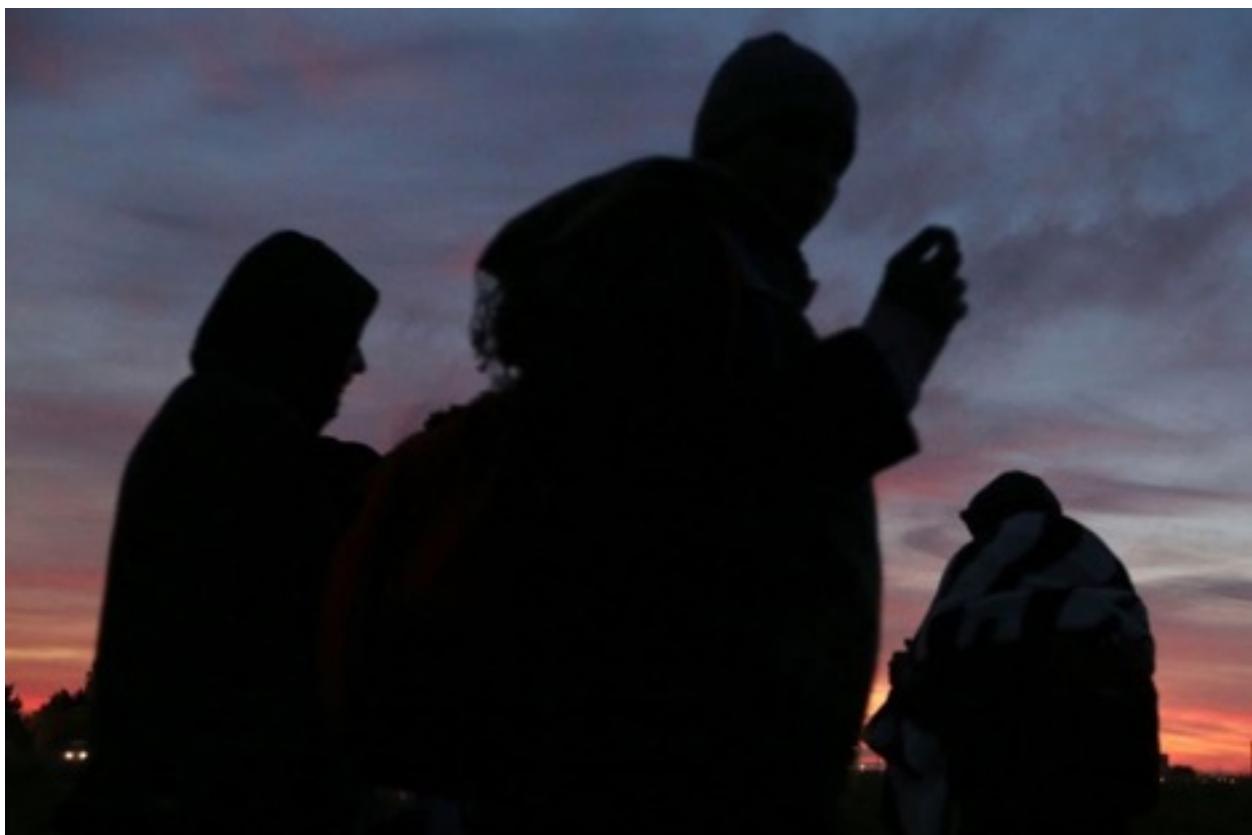


London borough opens doors to 'Jungle' migrant children



Ruth Holmes

AFPOctober 28, 2016



Nearly 4,400 adults, mostly single men, have been moved to towns and villages around France (AFP Photo/François Nascimbeni)

More

London (AFP) - Horrified by the desperate plight of traumatised children in the "Jungle" migrant camp in France, one London borough is seeking to provide a new life in Britain for unaccompanied youngsters.

As bulldozers raze the sprawling camp in the northern French port city of Calais this week, busloads of children have been arriving in Britain.

With the UK promising to take in hundreds more, local authorities face the challenge of resettling these youngsters -- many of whom have fled war and poverty in countries like Afghanistan, Eritrea and Sudan.

But media reports say one in four local authorities have refused to take in any children of the Jungle.

One London borough, Hammersmith and Fulham, has been at the forefront of efforts to bring them to Britain under the so-called Dubs Amendment passed in May, vowing to accommodate 15 in total.

While children with family ties in Britain have the right to claim asylum here, the Dubs legislation allows vulnerable youngsters with no such ties to seek refuge.

Taking 15 of the 1,500 children housed temporarily in shipping containers in the Jungle may not seem like many.

But Hammersmith and Fulham hopes its example will encourage other local authorities to follow suit, as Paris and London squabble over who is to blame for their plight.

- 'Driven mad by fear' -

Stephen Cowan, the borough council's leader, visited Calais in August with other London officials and was shocked by what he saw.

"You had this acute urine stench that hit you in the back of the throat," he told AFP, describing the "dusty, intimidating environment".

One child in particular struck him: a nine-year-old boy from Afghanistan who was "shivering" despite the summer heat.

"He looked overcome with stress. I asked the interpreter why he was shivering and he said: 'This boy has been driven mad by fear'."

The boy told Cowan: "I want somewhere where I will be safe at night and I will not be hurt anymore."

- Chaos and tears -

Moved by the experience, Cowan pledged that his plush west London borough would find homes for such vulnerable children -- though not all residents have supported the initiative.

A week before the camp was razed, the borough allowed 13 social workers to go to Calais to assess the needs of unaccompanied minors.

Social worker Rebecca Harvey recalled "chaotic" scene on arriving the day after police used tear gas during clashes at the camp.

She and her colleagues worked with an interpreter to take down key details: where the children were from, their state of mind and health, and hopes for the future.

One 13-year-old boy said he had left his home in Afghanistan after his father was beheaded and his mother shot dead in front of him by jihadists.

At the camp, "he was living in a tent with a man he didn't know and crying all the time.

"He said he just thought every day 'maybe it would be better if I threw myself under a truck and I didn't have to suffer anymore'," Harvey told AFP.

"His story was not unique by any stretch of the imagination."

Since mid-October, more than 200 children have arrived in Britain from Calais and more transfers are due in the coming days, the Home Office interior ministry says.

French Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve has said all minors "with proven family links in Britain" will eventually be transferred there, and that London has committed to reviewing all other cases where it is "in the child's interest" to settle across the Channel.

On Thursday, the first five of Hammersmith and Fulham's quota -- boys aged 11 and 12 -- arrived in London to register for asylum and were placed immediately into foster care.

With foster places scarce in the area, the authority has secured them homes, using government funding, outside the borough where carers are more readily available.

There they will be provided with access to education, health care, and support services including English language tuition, a council spokesman said.

The challenge now is to find "safe houses" in Britain, France or elsewhere in Europe for "every single one" of the 1,500 children remaining in Calais, said Cowan.

"Those children can't be allowed to get lost."