

September 27th - Calais Report

A Volunteer's Perspective

Start Time: 7am from St Albans (strict instructions from Tony)

Team: we were 7 Emmaus companions from St Albans and Village Carlton (Leon, Daniel, Pan, Chris, James, Geoff, Anthony, 2 staff members (Tony & Lesley) and 13 volunteers, too many to mention but all lovely people. In convoy came 6 Eritrean friends from London and a whole host of people from Emmaus Oxford who distributed on the other side of the camp.

Rendezvous: we gathered together on the 10.15am ferry and woke up with coffee and breakfast and some bracing sea air.



Arrival

We arrived in Calais, drove off the ferry and past the long fence, topped with the spirals of razor wire, reminiscent of a previous struggle on these same beaches. Barbed wire is still in good supply along the shores of Calais.

We turned left, down a long, straight road, past a chemical plant on the left and our first police car on the right. We continued down this road, past more factories as the sun shone down. We pulled up by self-service petrol pumps and gathered together our convoy of three Emmaus vans, another van and a 4 of extra cars. And then we headed to the camp.

Distribution

An hour later and we'd parked two of the Emmaus vans along the road which marked the beginning of the camp, opposite a wooden structure which some Afghans were nailing together - apparently they were building a new restaurant. In an effort to control the distribution process and make sure we were not swamped when we opened the boxes we'd positioned the vans back to back and sealed the area on each side with road barriers. Almost immediately a line formed, stretching back towards the motorway bridge. And the long process of distribution began as we opened our boxes of jackets, trousers and shoes, all pre-packed by size, and migrants came through our makeshift "aisles" to collect some fresh clothes.



What I Got Up To

I spent much of my time on one side of the barriers, making sure a few of the more impatient migrants didn't push their way into the distribution area without queuing up. Some of the men, and they were mostly men, were only young but they were tough and determined not to obey the rules. But at the same time they were teenage boys and whenever I got them talking they smiled cheekily, knowing full well they

were supposed to queue up like the rest. They were from Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan and Kurdistan. They spoke smatterings of English, French and German and sometimes they spoke in full sentences to me in their native tongue. Then they would duck away and disappear for a while, only to appear on the other side of the distribution area, where other Emmaus volunteers patiently held them back from the tantalising boxes of clothes.

My friend Nicola roamed up and down the line, keeping people in check, trying to pull out the queue-jumpers who everyone was shouting indignantly at. It was almost a game, ridiculous larking about in a ridiculous situation. And sometimes it was not a game, and people became angry and frustrated. Someone picked up a rock and I witnessed the power of the camp community as people calmed him down and he let it fall back into the dust.

Leila was in the middle of the distribution area, and her grace and patience was amazing as she greeted each migrant in turn, helping them choose trousers, jackets, shoes and socks, advising them on style, colour, fit and warmly bidding them farewell. By this time I was standing, less helpfully, at the end of the barrier, handing out bars of Reese's chocolate and same-size boxers to men of different shapes and sizes. I wondered to myself if the boxers were made of stretchy material. I doubted it.

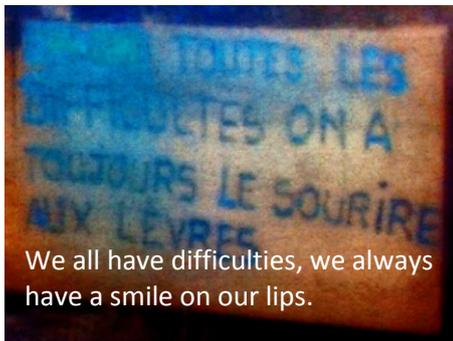
People I met:

- An Ethiopian man in a mismatched ladies waistcoat greeted me and told me his name was Fekado. In broken English he told me he'd travelled through the desert, across the Mediterranean and through Europe to get there. He gestured to the Ethiopian quarter and pointed out his tent in the midst.
- A handsome young Afghan joined me as I took a breather on a ridge, while the hectic distribution activity continued below. He was clean-shaven with a stylish haircut and glasses that brought out the colour of his deep brown eyes. He asked me if we were tired, coming there every day to give out clothes and shoes. I explained that we were only there for a day. He smiled and nodded. He asked me where I was from and when I told him he said he wanted to go to England. He said he had family in Southall. I told him I'd been to an Afghan restaurant in Southall and had a delicious dish of beans and rice. I asked him what he wanted to do in England and he said he wanted to study and become an engineer. "Afghanistan has nothing" he said.
- While wandering through the camp I passed a large shed, covered in tarpaulins and bin liners. Someone shouted from inside in annoyance and I poked my head in and saw a large, dark space, which appeared to be some kind of community hall. I smelt cooking and saw food laid out on the tables. I wandered away and a tall, broad-shouldered man in a large red ski jacket followed after me. He said he was a Kuwaiti Bedoon: "Bedoon" he said proudly, "you know?" He laughed and strode along happily, trying to speak in English, asking me where I was from and what I did. "I am sixteen" he said. He walked all the way with me until the camp ended and then waved goodbye and disappeared down a different street.



Observations

The hours flew by but eventually we stopped distributing clothes at around 6pm. We regrouped outside the camp and then returned to hand out firewood and walk through the streets. I say streets because they are streets, with restaurants, cafes, shops and mobile phone charging stations! I spotted a shop window made of real glass, and samosas and onion bhajis laid out on plates, tempting me to consider stopping for a snack. But we were off again and carried on further into the camp. We found the Eritrean church, which was having renovations and finally I saw some women, sitting by the makeshift wall that surrounded the church, dressed beautifully in clean linen and I marvelled at how they looked so smart and presentable despite the camp conditions they were living in.



End of the Day

"Take a photo of that sunset and the tents against the sky" I nudged my friend Nicola. I had forgotten my phone: all the photos to follow are hers. We were looking across the sand dunes towards the chemical plant, watching as the sky turn pastel pink and the silhouette of a toilet on stilts grew steadily more pronounced as the daylight faded. Painted onto the side of the toilet were the words *Freedom of Movement*. I'm not sure if this was supposed to be ironic.

Thank you to Tony and Shirley for organising and co-ordinating the day and for being so welcoming to us as volunteers. The Emmaus companions were amazingly calm and professional and dealt extremely well with several people who had become angry and volatile in the heat and intensity of the day. It was a pleasure to work with them and be part of their team.

