



**ENSEMBLE,
CONSTRUIRE
UN MONDE JUSTE
ET FRATERNEL**

Open Letter to the European Union, the United Nations and the Council of Europe regarding the urgent need for an adequate Covid-19 response in northern France

Calais, 27 March 2020

To

Ms Ylva Johansson, European Commissioner for Home Affairs
Mr Janez Lenarčič, Commissioner for Crisis Management
Mr David Sassoli, President of the European Parliament
Mr Juan Fernando López Aguilar, Chair of the LIBE Committee at the European Parliament
Mr Filippo Grandi, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Ms Leilani Farha, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing
Ms Dunja Mijatović, Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe

We, the undersigned organisations, are writing to draw your attention to the urgent situation in which displaced people find themselves in northern France; in Calais, Grande-Synthe and the surrounding area. It is imperative that strong and appropriate measures are taken in response to the COVID-19 health crisis, and we kindly ask you to utilise your influence and call on the French government to adopt such measures.

On the situation in northern France

Today, and for several decades, women, men and children are surviving in camps characterised by inhumane and unsanitary conditions, where access to drinking water, food, hygiene, health care and information is too often hampered or non-existent. Associations working with these vulnerable populations have been questioning the public authorities for many years, highlighting the need to implement a policy of hospitality, where the right to accommodation and housing is ensured, as well as the right to decent material living conditions, which uphold the principle of dignity for all individuals.

As the situation of extreme destitution facing displaced people persists, the COVID-19 pandemic only reinforces the vulnerability of these people, who, it should be emphasised, are already extremely weakened by precarious and unhealthy living conditions. In the absence of satisfactory state support and adequate care, the sanitary conditions in which they are kept make them particularly vulnerable to the ongoing health crisis. It is urgent to ensure the protection of both the displaced individuals themselves, as well as the associations and volunteers who support them, in order to strengthen efforts to slow the spread of the virus and prevent the risk of putting further strain on the already saturated healthcare system.

The State response

Last week, State services announced that they had implemented strict measures to protect the entire population from the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular measures of “communication with the migrant population, guaranteed access to water and soap to allow for the compliance with guidelines, support to ensure the continuity of operations by state actors and associations, and the care and confinement

of migrants with COVID-19 symptoms”. However, this official message regarding measures taken does not respond adequately to the current humanitarian crisis on the ground in northern France and, for the most part, such measures have in fact not been implemented.

Conversely, it has been observed in recent weeks that displaced people are not sufficiently informed of the current health situation, and of the guidelines and containment measures implemented. Sanitary facilities and water points are sorely lacking (the rare installations are often located hundreds of meters or even kilometres from living spaces), and access to sufficient drinking water is not always guaranteed. The daily evictions of living spaces continue, without any alternative solution of shelters being offered. Finally, the application of the measures recommended by the government also limits the actions carried out by associations, providing little respite to people in displacement. In this sense, this crisis reveals the unquestionable inadequacy of the means put in place by the State to protect people.

In this context, and according to media sources, the mayor of Calais, Natacha Bouchart, is planning to open “reception and containment centres” in the area. While we acknowledge and appreciate the willingness of the State to make provisions for displaced people, we are particularly worried about the progress of this operation, given that it is unclear what would be the consequences for individuals who are unwilling to enter the shelters and given that such centres appear to be semi-coercive devices that would be unlikely to meet the needs of vulnerable people. We fear that this operation will give priority to a short-term effectiveness objective over sustainable reception arrangements that respect and uphold the rights of displaced people. Finally, it is to be feared that the State will suspend all the services (distribution of meals, showers, toilets, water points) obtained through extensive efforts by civil society, which risks worsening the current humanitarian situation.

An appropriate and sustainable response must be implemented

Today, more than ever, it is extremely urgent that more constructive, humane and sustainable solutions are implemented in northern France. Such solutions must include, but not be limited to:

- The opening of several unconditional, suitable and sustainable accommodation places in northern France, which must meet all fundamental needs and which are intended to provide support to vulnerable groups. This must not take the form of temporary “reception and containment centers”, which, *a priori*, are intended to shelter people only during the time of the COVID-19 epidemic.
- The implementation, without delay, of concrete and specifically adapted measures to ensure the full protection of unaccompanied minors present in these territories.
- The provision of clear and accessible information, adapted to the displaced communities.
- An immediate halt to the evictions of camps and settlements.
- A guarantee of the continuity of access to rights, and the guarantee of basic needs (food distributions, access to sanitation facilities, clean drinking water, etc.).

We urge the European institutions to:

- Issue a set of recommendation to France, including the above-mentioned aspects.
- Support the French government in its efforts to ensure health care and provisions are extended to include displaced populations, including measures for infection prevention and control, rapid identification and isolation of existing cases, and the treatment of individuals experiencing severe cases.

We urge the bodies of the Council of Europe and the United Nations to:

- Issue a set of recommendation to France including the above-mentioned aspects.
- Monitor France's attainment of endeavours to draw up plans for adequate provisions in camps and settlements.
- Ensure that France respects human rights of displaced individuals including the right to asylum and the rights to life, dignity and safety.

Thank you for your time and attention to these critical matters. We remain at your full disposal for any further information that may be useful. We look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

Auberge des Migrants

Help Refugees

Human Rights Observers

Refugee Youth Service

Refugee Rights Europe

Refugee Women's Centre

Secours Catholique Pas-de-Calais