

'The jungle is finished but our work goes on.'



Dear friends,

'The jungle is finished'

Often people ask me how I feel now the jungle has gone and especially to experience the demolition from so close by again – the answer is that my heart is saddened on the way it all happened, the people I worked with for months have forcibly been moved, a community I belonged to is now no longer. So, all our volunteers and those of our partner Caritas and the many others feel sad and angry.



*"I am sad and heartbroken not because of the jungle,
the jungle is only dust but because of the people who are
broken, because the dust in our souls and eyes,
because I love I am heartbroken
but I will always love as this you will never steal from me."
October 28, 2016*

The demolition happened in 5 days, about 10.000 people moved in less than a weeks' time across all the corners of France. In bus coaches, they didn't know where they were taken, not knowing for sure how long they will be able to stay at these centres and what their legal status would be. The authorities have always communicated vaguely and at the very last moment.

We are now getting phone calls from the people who have our numbers, to say where they have arrived and how it is. From Marseilles, Vienne, Toulouse, Strasbourg to Langres.



I am worried about my friend Amaniël who is 16 (and waiting to go to his sister in the UK) he is now in a centre in the South of France not knowing what follows. Or Yamanjé (in this picture from the jungle) who also is 16 and had hoped to be on a bus to London but first passes through a centre in Langres. These youngsters are travelling alone without family or friends. I had met them in the Orthodox Church in the jungle and followed them closely because of their vulnerability. We stay in contact with Amaniël and his sister in the UK and with Yamanjé.

I am worried about Mohammed who lived for 8 months in the jungle, an isolated young Sudanese man with serious mental health issues. Who lost control over his life after losing his young wife traveling through the Libyan Desert. He stepped on a coach to somewhere with the help of an Eritrean man who took care of him. I couldn't walk through the camp or Mohammed came running shouting either in joy or anger 'babba, babba, babba'. He could be so annoying sometimes asking all attention at the wrong moment and scarring off people. But I learned to love him and care for him and to put my fears aside. What will happen to him? Will they understand it is a mental health problems, psychological pain and not anger?

I am worried for Titi, one of the Eritrean women who came praying at our house and called our volunteers crying that she didn't know where the coach was taking her and she was already more than 12 hours on the bus. She also ended up somewhere south near the Spanish border.

After everything refugees have been through that is how we treat them.

In the last months so many people passed through our house, so many volunteers and students joined us and we had the privilege of being part of so many people's lives, learned from their cultures, customs and languages. The jungle of Calais was a place of destitution and problems, pain and violence but also of community, hospitality and friendship.



"It takes a lot of resources to welcome somebody with food and tea. Water needs to be heated on little wood fires. there is shortages of wood in the jungle. Volunteers bring it in and distribute it. Making a little fire, bringing the water to the boil, washing the cups with hot water.

First the guests are served and when there is enough and there are enough cups the hosts take for themselves. Hospitality in the jungle in all the communities is a big thing. To share what you have with the stranger." October 17, 2016.

And it was one of the few places in the world I knew that Afghans, Sudanese, Ethiopians, Eritrean, Muslims and Christians lived together and formed community and faced all the challenges this posed.

No one should live in a jungle; no one should live in that kind of destitution but it ended so abruptly and without respect for the refugees and migrants. For several nights a 100 minors ended up sleeping on the street in the jungle because there was not enough place foreseen in the shelters for minors.



As the police surround the church and prepare to evict those protecting it, members of the Jungle's Eritrean community partake in one last prayer service.

Photo by Jack Steadman.

Refugees who have left the jungle often struggle with it, for some refugees leaving the jungle became scary. I was fortunate to accompany a few refugees and a family on their journey to the UK. For some fear and anxiety took over.

'I hear your crying in my head, I hear your fears and pains from the jungle nights alone. And I do not know what to do, I do not know what to say. I want to hold you as you were my son. But now you have to let the jungle go, out of your head. Wipe the jungle dust from your shoes, shin up and live the beauty that you are.' October 14, 2016.

The house

From the very beginning our house focussed on the most vulnerable refugees and migrants. Practically that meant that most people coming in to the house had health problems, exhaustion or were stressed out. Most people came to us either from the city hospital or the jungle hospital – in certain way our house evolved a bit into a hospice. Weekly visits to the refugees in the hospital became part of our work, transport to and from the hospital became part of our work to.

The jungle hospital packed up on Friday and emptied its 'container modules', the refugees in the jungle-hospital were placed in other centres, 'oh... wait what about Mamoot the nurses most of panicked'. It seems government forgot about him. Mamoot (from Egypt) is now in our house, he is a young man recovering from bone cancer legally in this country. He will be staying with us until his next admission to hospital in two weeks. And what about Emal from Afghanistan who has a broken jaw and stays with us until local government finds him accommodation?

Our house has six guests for the moment, five with health or vulnerability issues. The work goes on, there are more refugees coming from hospital who have no jungle anymore to go to. Our work goes on.



From our early beginnings our community and house have had a special relationship with the local L'Arche community and the community of Taize. We have had exchanges and days together, our spirituality's meet each other.

In this picture members of L'Arche Ambelteuze, our house and Jean Vanier.

Calais and her refugees

Refugees and migrants have been coming to Calais since 1998, since the war of Kosovo. Refugees have lived in squatted houses, beach huts, in bushes, in the dunes and in several jungles. As long as Calais is the geographical and logistic connection point between France and the UK refugees and migrants will come to Calais. And hopefully our work will continue to serve the most vulnerable of Gods children here in Calais.

Often I have met God in the jungle, in the walking and talking with refugees, in sitting together in silence because we have no language in common just enjoying a cup of tea, in the joy and the pain of what happens in these people lives my relationship with God has deepened and changed me. I now understand for myself more what it means to meet Christ in the stranger.

In the following 7 to 8 weeks we will have to see how we can start working again in Calais with new arrival refugees and migrants. No, the work hasn't finished it will change. While in the jungle refugees could come to us with their needs and questions, now we are going to have to find ourselves the refugees moving around.

Caritas (Secours Catholique Calais), Auberge des Migrants, Salam, Medicin du Monde and our house Maria Skobtsova will keep on working in Calais and surroundings. We still will need your prayer and support.

Please keep in your prayers:

The guests in our house: Mamoot, Abram, Dawid, Henok, Yared, Emal for their health and wellbeing;
for our in house volunteers and the people who support us
our youngsters scattered around France especially Sami, Yamanjé and Amanuel (and his sister in the UK)
and for all refugees from Calais.

Yours faithfully,

Br. Johannes

for all at St. Maria Skobtsova House CW

If you would like to support us financially:

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