

In Calais migrant camp, mood turns somber in aftermath of Paris attacks

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*(The Christian Science Monitor)* Wind whips the plastic tarps and tents that hold together the livelihoods of some 6,000 people living in Calais' refugee camp, as the dirt paths squeezed between the thousands of makeshift homes fill with muddy puddles. Over the weekend, refugees and migrants from Eritrea, Sudan, Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan got a first taste of the winter that everyone has feared for months.

"We don't have enough clothes, we don't have enough blankets, we're very cold," said Mohammed Swara, an Iraqi who has visited the medical caravan in the camp, known as the Jungle, to deal with what are becoming constant colds.

For months, people like Swara have been arriving in the Jungle, watching the camp swell along with Europe's migrant crisis. Residents here have opened restaurants, barbershops, churches, mosques, and schools to create a semblance of normal life.

But this weekend, the mood was changed from the bustle of daily routines. Around 200 camp residents from a handful of nationalities took a few moments inside the activities tent, a white dome perched on a mound of dirt, to pray for the victims of the Paris attacks on Friday.

Inside the dome, residents of various nationalities joined hands to pay their respects to the 129 dead in Friday's coordinated terrorist attacks. After three minutes of silence, people were invited to speak.

"Several people apologized for what this so-called Muslim terrorist group had done," said Joe Murphy, one of two Britons in charge of running the Good Chance theater company, which organizes circus and theater activities for camp residents and put on the vigil. "They wanted to emphasize that 'We are not attached to those people, they are not Muslims.' "

"Those people" refers to members of the self-described Islamic State, the extremist group that has claimed responsibility for the Paris attacks. Many residents in the

camp, which now holds a majority of people from Muslim communities, fear that the Paris attacks could shift attitudes on refugees and Europe's open-door policy. They worry their months-long journey could be for naught.

"Oh no, I can't believe it could happen . . . they can't reject our asylum applications because of this," said Xelan Nazhad, shaking her head as her three-month-old daughter, Cully, smiles on her lap. Nazhad left violence in her hometown of Kirkuk, in Iraqi Kurdistan, a little over two months ago with seven relatives. Cully was only 15 days old.

"I'm very scared they will deport us," she said.

Already, news that migrants may have infiltrated the Islamic State has contributed to strong rhetoric from France's far-right National Front party leader Marine Le Pen as well as French President François Hollande—about controlling country borders and the flow of migration.

A Syrian passport was found next to the body of one of the suicide bombers in Paris. It was linked to a man who passed through Greece on October 3, then Serbia and Italy. And on Monday, French authorities were investigating an Algerian migrant who seemed to have knowledge of an impending attack in Paris.

Recent incidents in the Calais camp haven't helped migrants' reputation. A fire that blasted through a portion of the camp on Friday, at approximately the same time as the Paris attacks, was thought to have been started by extremists. The reality, say volunteers, was that a candle was left burning in someone's tent.

"The woman was very embarrassed," said Alexandra, a volunteer with the Auberge des Migrants organization. "Luckily, she woke up and started screaming and everyone was able to get out of the area in time."

Meanwhile, clashes with police officers stationed at the camp have increased, contributing to local residents' fears that migrants equal trouble. On Sunday, police clashed with migrants who attempted to jump into trucks heading across the border into Britain during a traffic jam, ending in chaos and tear gas.

"The migrants here used to be families, now the type of migrant has changed," said Michel Leman in a local cafe. "I am definitely for a re-establishment of the French borders."

But while changes to immigration policy and threats of closed borders may be on the horizon, most residents of the camp say they will still find a way to continue on their journey. Going back home isn't an option for them. Even with the approaching winter, an increasingly unbearable living situation, and limited prospects for either crossing into the UK or claiming French asylum, most say being at the Jungle is still better than returning home.

“We feel old; we’re tired of this life,” said Nazhad, whose family sleeps three to a bed in the small camper they’ve been given in the Iraqi section of the camp. “But of course France is better than Iraq. In Iraq there are always bombs. So no, we will stay here.”