

Paris NGOs warn asylum seekers are becoming invisible



More than 200 asylum seekers from Afghanistan, South Sudan and Eritrea live in tents at Porte d'Aubervilliers in northern Paris. -RFI/Mike Woods

The European refugee crisis of recent years has waned, but French humanitarian workers say there are just as many asylum seekers on the streets of Paris and that their situation has become more difficult under President Emmanuel Macron.

Amir, a 20-year-old Afghan who arrived in France last year, opens the tent he shares with a friend. Inside are a sleeping bag, backpack, baguette and several bottles of water.

"I've been sleeping outside for six months," he says. "We don't have a place, just tents and blankets."

His tent is one of about a hundred in the camp at the Porte d'Aubervilliers, at the northern limit of Paris. NGOs estimate at least 200 people from Afghanistan, South Sudan and Eritrea live here, including many women and children.

"Families live in these tents," Amir says. "It's not good. Families need a place for sleeping."

Amir and the others have applied for asylum in France, but the process can take several years, and in the meantime, they have not been offered stable housing and have nowhere else to go.

NGOs estimate that between 1,000 to 1,400 asylum seekers are currently on the streets of the French capital, most of them in a much larger and dirtier camp at the nearby Porte de La Chapelle.

Either camp could be gone tomorrow, cleared in an early morning police raid. If recent history is any indication, Amir and the other migrants will be evicted and placed in temporary housing before returning to the street and setting up new

tents.

Risk of becoming invisible

French humanitarian workers say they've seen thousands of people in a similar situation over the past three years, and that the only thing that has changed is that the camps are being pushed further from the city centre.

"Before, it was more in the middle of the city, so it was easier for journalists to come, for it to be more visible, for the charities to help, for the asylum seekers to go to the different offices," says Alix Geoffroy of the humanitarian group Utopia 56.

"Now it's farther, almost outside Paris, and so it's more difficult for everybody, for it to be visible, for them to go to their appointments, for the charities to reach them."



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At the Paris protest over conditions for would-be #refugees caught in a cycle of homelessness and eviction. The rally's slogan is #TropCestTrop, enough is enough#exiles #migration #campements #Stalingrad

Utopia 56 is one of 17 groups that organised a one-day strike on Tuesday, suspending the delivery of meals and other aid to hold a rally in northern Paris in the hope of drawing attention to the realities asylum seekers are facing.

"They are in places where they are not visible for Parisians," says Silvana Gaeta, a volunteer with the charity Solidarité Migrants Wilson. "Many people think the crisis is over and that there are no more refugees around, because they don't see them."

From refugee crisis to welcoming crisis

As the mass influx of would-be refugees to Europe that kept migration in the headlines through 2015 and 2016 has dwindled, so too has the attention given to the asylum seekers stranded in the French capital.

“Passages from across the Mediterranean or elsewhere have largely diminished these past years,” says Louis Barda of the charity Médecins du Monde (Doctors of the World), explaining that many asylum seekers in France have been turned away from other countries.

“Some people we meet have been in Europe for five to 10 years, and they have the impression they have become stateless,” Barda says.

The paradox is that, despite the lower influx, there are similar numbers of people living on the streets as there were three years ago.

“Less and less people are coming, the refugee crisis is completely over, and it’s just a crisis of welcoming the people here,” says Alix Geoffroy. “It’s weird, and we feel the government is leading a dysfunctional asylum policy, and that there is a willingness to have the situation remain so difficult.”

Worse under Macron

The 17 groups are calling on the government to provide long-term housing solutions, to devise a more efficient asylum system and to ensure acceptable hygienic conditions in camps as long as they exist.

But there is also the sense that the administration of President Emmanuel Macron is less interested than that of his predecessor François Hollande in finding these solutions.

“It’s been worse under Macron, because he won’t have contact with any NGOs or charities that work on the ground,” Geoffroy says.

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Placards read “traffickers of solidarity” and “traffickers of humanity”, no doubt in reference to interior minister Christophe Castaner’s recent remarks that NGOs rescuing migrants in the Mediterranean Sea were complicit with human traffickers

At the rally, some placards read “traffickers of solidarity” and “traffickers of humanity”, reading like responses to recent remarks in which Interior Minister Christophe Castaner accused humanitarian groups rescuing migrants in the Mediterranean of complicity and collusion with human traffickers.

“We’re asking whether it’s up to citizens, volunteers and NGOs to do the job of the public officials, or whether the state should be expected to take care of these people,” says Louis Barda.

The groups estimate that every week, volunteers distribute nearly 15,000 meals and 1,600 pieces of clothing, blankets and tents, perform 290 medical and 700 legal consultations and make 600 night visits to the camps.

Source:

<http://en.rfi.fr/france/20190410-paris-ngos-warn-asylum-seekers-are-becoming-invisible>

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