

## ***Toxic Life? The Slow Violence of refugee abandonment***

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*“The single most important challenge to the safety and protection of refugees arises from populist politics and toxic public debates”*

– Volker Türk, UNHCR’s Assistant High Commissioner for Protection ([UN 2015](#))

While conducting research this summer in the so-called ‘new Jungle’ in Calais – the largest informal migrant camp in mainland Europe – many refugees who had fled distant conflicts, shared their stories of physical violence; narratives of



kidnap, extortion and murder. ‘*They threatened to kill me*’ explained one Eritrean refugee, recalling how he had been held ransom by ‘*fascists*’ in northern Libya, before he made the perilous journey to Italy, packed cheek-by-jowl into an inflatable boat with eighty other terrified souls. (Image: ‘The Camp’, credit Thom Davies)

Sudanese residents cook pork on an open fire. Photograph by Thom Davies



Invited into makeshift shelters in the overcrowded refugee camp, and over long conversations with cups of sweet tea, some residents showed me shaky video footage of these dangerous maritime voyages, while others occasionally discussed their physical scars. ‘*The Taliban did it*’ explained one refugee from Afghanistan while I bagged

and labelled a food sample for laboratory analysis in the UK. He was referring to his index finger which had been severed at the second knuckle; ‘*Daesh*’ [Islamic State] another refugee simply remarked, as he lifted up his trouser leg to reveal two bullet wounds, and the reason that he had to flee Kurdistan.

*The environmental health situation in the Calais camp in northern France reveals another, slower, less visible, but perhaps just as long-lasting form of violence – that of abandonment.*

As global refugee numbers reach levels not witnessed since the end of WW2 ([UNHCR 2015](#)), and with arrivals into Europe surpassing half a million this year alone, bodily trauma enacted upon countless refugees is both shocking and ‘necropolitical’ ([Mbembe 2003](#)). But the violence that these displaced people face does not stop when they reach European shores ([Davies & Isakjee 2015](#)). The research I have been conducting with my colleagues Surindar Dhesi and Arshad Isakjee into the environmental health situation in the Calais camp in northern France reveals another, slower, less visible, but perhaps just as long-lasting form of violence – that of abandonment.

Refugees are suffering from an invisible brutality that is reminiscent of Nixon’s environmental concept of ‘slow violence’:

*‘a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all’* ([Nixon 2011](#), 2)



A refugee fills his water bottle at one of the five water points. This research found evidence of faecal contamination located on one of the taps. Photograph by Thom Davies.

For scholars and activists of environmental (in)justice, it will come

as no surprise that the only location that French authorities have permitted Calais’

destitute to set up camp, is the site of an old quarry and informal dumping ground. No surprise either, that a large chemical and metallurgy factory looms over this wasteland, on the other side of a busy motorway. When the sea breeze is in the wrong direction, the unsettling scent of chemical pollution from the adjacent 'Zone Industrielle des Dunes' wafts over the camp, which is now [home to around 6000 refugees](#) and migrants. Below them, in the sandy soil of the camp, the rubble remnants from years of illegal fly-tipping can be seen jutting out of the ground. Environmental justice research, into the placement of petrochemical industries for example ([Allen 2003](#); [Ottinger 2013](#)) or the ability of communities to cope with disaster ([Bullard & Wright 2009](#)), shows time and again, that it is the most vulnerable, impoverished and discriminated groups who face the worst consequences of environmental pollution and degradation ([Harvey 2006](#)).

In line with Allen's call that '*science must start from the lives, questions, and experiences of the marginalised*' ([Allen 2003](#), 6), my colleagues and I were in the camp this summer to conduct the first public health investigation of the 'new Jungle' ([Dhesi et al 2015](#)). We aimed to add scientific weight to the growing calls to treat the situation around Calais as a humanitarian crisis. With funding from the [ESRC](#), we interviewed residents of the camp, but also took bacteria swabs, food samples, dust samples and measured particulates in the air, in an attempt 'to produce science that can directly support environmental regulation, law and health care' ([Fortun & Fortun 2005](#), 46). What we found was shocking (see [Guardian 2015](#)).

Some of the scientific equipment that the research team used to measure the particulates in the air. Photograph by Thom Davies.

Monitoring the air quality in the camp revealed particulate matter at significantly high concentrations. The WHO recommend that PM<sub>2.5</sub> not to exceed 15 µg /m<sup>3</sup> as an average over a 24 hour period ([WHO 2014](#)).



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In the camp, next to the industrial zone, a motorway and the numerous open fires used for cooking and keeping warm, average concentrations were over 2000 µg /m<sup>3</sup>, peaking occasionally at 12,000 µg /m<sup>3</sup> – far above safe levels. We found other invisible dangers too, including the use of chemical containers that once held toxic liquids being repurposed to transport drinking water from the taps in the camp. Alarming, swabs taken from one of these taps held concentrations of bacteria that suggested the presence of faecal matter, and significant levels of pathogens from several other swabs were found, doubtless contributing to the widespread cases of vomiting and diarrhoea that were reported.



Many containers that were designed to carry hazardous chemicals are now used to store water. Photograph by Thom Davies.

Along with the scabies and lice that blight many residents of the camp, all of these invisible dangers are *completely* preventable, if not for the political abandonment that the refugees suffer; a 'violent abandonment' ([Davies & Isakjee 2015](#)) transcending scales from the microbiological to the biopolitical.

The environmental campaigner Jim Puckett argues that 'toxic waste will always run downhill on an economic path of least resistance' (cited in [Bauman 2004](#)). At the bottom of the heap in Calais are its growing number of refugees. In a *de facto* sense,

refugees in Europe have been 'designated expendable' ([Nixon 2011](#), 151) and politically 'superfluous' ([Arendt 1953](#), 323); in Calais they have been forced to live in circumstances that do not meet internationally recognised standards for refugee camps ([WHO 2000](#), [UNHCR 2007](#), [Sphere project 2015](#)), let alone the environmental protection that European citizens would expect.

Adriana [Petryna \(2002\)](#), in her work on post-Chernobyl Liquidators, posits the idea of 'biological citizenship' as a means by which Ukrainians who have been exposed to toxic pollution can lay claim to compensation and political status by using their toxic exposure as political leverage. Though this concept was useful to my own ethnographic research in Chernobyl ([Davies 2015](#); [Davies & Polese 2015](#)), for refugees in Calais, this situation could never arise. After all, to claim biological citizenship you must first become a citizen.



Many of the informal structures that refugees sleep in are very cold at night and overcrowded. Photograph by Thom Davies.

How then, are we to understand the social and political circumstances that allow refugees and migrants to suffer such brutal abandonment? Academics often turn to Giorgio Agamben for explanation, leaning on his concept of '[bare life](#)' (1998), where sovereign power, according to Agamben, reduces certain groups to mere biology, and denies them political worth. Increasingly however this has been critiqued by scholars who highlight the agency and acts of (political) resistance utilised by such

disempowered groups (Sigona 2015). Perhaps Bauman's idea of 'wasted lives' (Bauman 2004) comes closer, where he invokes the idea that certain individuals have been 'dumped into the refuse heaps of asylum systems' (Wylie 2013, 57) – quite literally, in the case of Calais.

*The quick brutality of physical violence that refugees suffer has mutated into a slow, stealthy and hidden violence of abandonment*

In light of accidents such as Bhopal, Chernobyl and Fukushima, and the 'slow violence' (Nixon 2011) of climate change, the image of 'environmental refugees' (Gill 2010) fleeing from landscapes decimated by toxic pollution is not a new one. But I would suggest also that refugees in Europe fleeing geopolitical conflicts today are being treated in an increasingly 'toxic' manner. Framed as existential threats to the status-quo of the European political order – refugees and irregular migrants become hazardous life; removed, encamped, numbered and regulated, set outside non-polluted spaces. They are framed as carcinogenic threats against European borders and biopolitics. Transmutating from *Humanitarian* issue to *Hazardous* threat, refugees in (and beyond) the informal and formal camps of Europe have become 'surplus people' (Nixon 2011), made politically toxic.

The quick brutality of physical violence that refugees suffer has mutated into a 'slow' (Nixon 2011), 'stealthy' (Li 2010) and 'hidden violence of abandonment' within Europe (Davies & Polese 2015, 38), and one that exposes expendable life to environmental harm; a toxic mutation that designates refugees as superfluous and subject to a slow brutality that transcends spatial scales, yet often remains unseen. Exploring the abandonment of vulnerable groups through the motif of toxicity may provide new inroads into this ongoing crisis.

(Featured images: credit Thom Davies)

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