

OBSERVATIONS OF STATE VIOLENCE AT THE FRENCH-UK BORDER

Calais and Grande-Synthe



Summary of the 2020 annual report
Human Rights Observers - HRO
















In collaboration with





Annual report of observations of evictions, Calais - 2020

Data collected during evictions of informal living sites *

	At least 967 evictions of informal settlements		At least 25 living spaces evicted
	At least 349 arrests during evictions		At least 2816 tents and tarps seized
	Administrative documents seized at least 5 times		At least 51 mobile phones and portable batteries seized
	At least 802 sleeping bags and blankets seized		Clothes seized at least 80 times
	At least 228 bags seized		Wood seized at least 74 times
	At least 88 mattresses and 54 other items of furniture seized		At least 116 bicycles seized
	An average of 163 unaccompanied children met per month **		25 instances of violence against displaced people observed
	At least 155 attempts at intimidation against observers, including 30 fines for breaking regulations during the second lockdown		

* This data is based on our observations, and is therefore not exhaustive.











** Number of self-declared UACs living in the streets, met by the associations (those not mandated by the State). This number is an underrepresentation of the number of children living on the streets because the associations marauds do not cover daily all places where UACs live; some children do not communicate with the associations; others have direct access to shelter via the mandated association and are therefore not included in this figure. One observation remains: repeated evictions are a source of increased fragility and even disappearance of these children, both girls and boys, and therefore increase the risk of trafficking and exploitation.





Annual report of observations of evictions, Grande- Synthe - 2020

Data collected during evictions of informal living sites *

	At least 91 evictions of informal settlements		At least 19 living spaces evicted
	At least 149 arrests during evictions		At least 2110 tents and tarps seized
	At least 357 sleeping bags and blankets seized		At least 32 bags seized
	At least 5 mobile phone seized		An average of 46 unaccompanied children met per month **
	16 instances of violence against displaced people observed		At least 36 attempts at intimidation against observers

* This data is based on our observations, and is therefore not exhaustive.

** The number of reports made to authorities is below the actual number of unaccompanied children present and in danger in Grande-Synthe. On this territory, contrary to Calais, no association that is not mandated by the State has any specific activity targeting UACs or is able to carry out this precise identification work. One observation remains: repeated evictions are a source of increased fragility and even disappearance of these children, both girls and boys, and therefore of increased risks of trafficking and exploitation (Source: Utopia 56)

Context

For decades, the French and British governments have pursued a policy of fighting "fixation points", or the creation of informal settlements, of displaced people at the French-UK border. This violent policy is continuously intensifying. It has taken several forms, as outlined in this summary of the report and detailed in the full publication: fencing and deforestation of land to prevent their habitation, arbitrary identity checks and discrimination, systematic evictions from informal living sites, regardless of severe weather or even a global pandemic. Despite the multiple denunciations of these violent and abusive practices, the authorities insist, loudly and clearly, on their intention to persevere with the same policy.

The data presented in this report was observed directly by our team and/or reported by various actors present at the border.

HRO in a few words

The Human Rights Observers (HRO) project aims to document, denounce and put an end to the violations of the human rights of displaced people at the French-UK border (more precisely, Calais and Grande-Synthe). Our modus operandi resembles copwatching. We are present as much as possible during police operations and especially during evictions of informal living sites, in order to document these practices.

I. Evictions of living spaces: daily harassment at the border

Understanding evictions of living sites in Calais and Grande-Synthe

In 2020, a total of 1058 evictions from living sites were carried out in Calais and Grande-Synthe. In Calais, the public authorities carry out two types of evictions: smaller regular evictions that take place every forty-eight hours and large-scale evictions on an irregular basis. In Grande-Synthe, the frequency of evictions fluctuates between one and three times a week, with each eviction resulting in the total destruction of the living sites.

This elaborate system reflects the xenophobic and repressive nature of French policy towards people in transit, who are approached daily from a purely securitised perspective. Law enforcement bodies are not used for protection purposes, but instead to carry out and enforce the systematic harassment conceived and orchestrated by the French authorities.

The deliberate invisibilisation of evictions

As soon as police forces arrive at the living sites, they form an arbitrarily defined human perimeter, the aim of which is to delimit a zone within which observers are not allowed to enter.

Above all, this perimeter constitutes a deliberate obstruction to attempts at documentation and contributes to the invisibilisation of violence perpetrated at the border. In addition to obstructing observation, the authorities' determination to conceal the way in which these evictions are carried out is also reflected in the acts of intimidation against those who observe them. The state of emergency due to the public health crisis has also been used by the State to justify prohibiting the presence of the observer teams during evictions. Our teams were fined 32 times throughout the two lockdowns in 2020 while carrying out our activities.

Theft and destruction

During these eviction operations, we continue to observe thefts and destruction of personal property (backpacks, administrative documents, medicines, tents, sleeping bags, etc.). Although a system is in place in Calais which theoretically gives those evicted the possibility of retrieving their seized belongings, the practical arrangements considerably limit the effectiveness of this mechanism. For illustration, in 2020, one in two people who came to claim their belongings were unable to recover them via this system. There is no equivalent system in Grande-Synthe, where all property and shelters are seized or destroyed in the course of evictions from living sites.

'Sheltering operations' or pushing people away from the border?

By law, an eviction should at the very least be accompanied by a proposition of alternative accommodation. This sheltering must be consensual and must involve the provision of comprehensive information to the persons concerned. In practice, 97.6% of evictions in Calais were not followed by an effective accommodation solution. When sheltering operations were implemented following the evictions, they were often forced and carried out under duress. In addition to this coercion, the absence of a social needs assessment prior to the eviction means that the type of accommodation provided is often ill-suited. In Calais and Grande-Synthe, these operations are understood as means to remove people from the border and relocate them to distant temporary reception centres, in complete contempt of the most basic rights of displaced people.

Arbitrary arrests

Evictions at the border can also be understood as the first step of a long procedure aiming to control the administrative situation of displaced persons. Identity checks carried out during evictions, followed by arbitrary - and at times violent - arrests, followed by placement in a detention centre (CRA), the issuing of an 'Obligation to Leave the French Territory' (OQTF) and the potential deportation from France. HRO are daily witnesses to identity checks based on racial profiling. This harassment is intended to achieve the same objective as that of sheltering operations: to keep those blocked at the border away from the crossing areas.

II. Fighting fixation points: the instrumentalisation of the law

Both in Calais and Grande-Synthe, various procedures are used to achieve the eviction of inhabited land. These procedures are used by the authorities in a complementary manner, so as to create a mechanism enabling the systematic eviction from living sites.

The use of court decisions as a strategy to control living spaces

French legal procedures used to evict: 'ordonnances sur requête' and 'référés mesures-utiles'

In Calais and Grande-Synthe, the deployment of these procedures by the owners of the occupied land is really about the temporary removal of people from the border. They result in large-scale evictions of living spaces which are frequently fenced off or made permanently inaccessible in the following days. Further contributing to the hostility of the border, is the fact that most often, the court rulings are issued without allowing evicted individuals to present their case to the judge, in direct breach of the legal right to be heard.



The use of criminal law as a strategy of harassment

In Calais, since the 8th of August 2018, living sites are evicted every 48 hours on the basis that the illicit occupation of land is an offence in which the perpetrators are caught in the immediate act of wrongdoing - in *flagrante delicto*. Nevermind that these sites have generally been occupied for weeks, months or even years and that the police convoy is identical in every respect to the one that intervenes following a court decision, and still operates in the same way. All these elements demonstrate the discrepancy with the alleged procedure. The use of criminal law enables the authorities to evict living sites very easily, in keeping with the objective of waging a constant battle against fixation points.



III. Beyond evictions of living spaces: systematic State violence at the border

Violence on a daily basis

For years and even decades, individuals, collectives, local to international actors have denounced acts of violence committed by persons exercising public authority against displaced persons in Calais and Grande-Synthe. In 2020, we directly witnessed or were made aware of: deliberate assault, theft and destruction of personal property, disproportionate use of tear gas, attacks with dogs at border crossings, sleep deprivation, food deprivation, control and restriction of living spaces, as well as racially motivated humiliations. Thus, a culture of normalised violence, deliberate degrading treatment, abuse of power and impunity is deeply entrenched and remains unchallenged by those in power. This culture of impunity gives way to abusive and illegal practices as a means of fulfilling the State's objectives at the border.

Racism and discrimination

We recorded numerous acts of discrimination in 2020, which are inherent to the violence and blatant State racism¹ at the border. The discrimination reported concerned access to public buses in Calais and to shopping centres in Calais and Grande-Synthe.

Distinctions between people were made on the basis of their origin, their physical appearance, the particular vulnerability resulting from their perceived economic situation, their place of residence, their health condition, or their language.



Conclusion

In Grande-Synthe and Calais, violence and police harassment are ever-present. After each eviction, each person is condemned once again to being on the move and in a state of prolonged displacement. The precarious situation of each person is maintained and perpetuated, exacerbating the stigmatisation and racism that they face.

The spectrum of securitising policies carried out by the French state at the border, including the policy of fighting against fixation points in Calais and Grande-Synthe, constantly violate the fundamental rights of the people who find themselves blocked there.

Freedom of movement, access to water and food, access to health care, the right to shelter, the right to respect for private and family life, the protection of the best interests of the child and the right to an effective remedy, are all rights that are being continuously violated at the border. This list is far from being exhaustive.

¹ For more on State racism, see the book by F. Dhume, X. Dunezat, C. Gourdeau, A. Rabaud, "Du racisme d'État en France ?", 2020.