

Calais migrants 'becoming more violent' in attempts to reach Britain

Police say they are struggling to contain violence and crime by illegal immigrants encamped in and around the French port and desperate to cross the Channel



A Polish lorry driver opens his vehicle to find migrants from Eritrea hiding inside at a lorry park at the port of Calais Photo: Geoff Pugh/The Telegraph

David Chazan, Paris

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Illegal immigrants in Calais trying to reach Britain are becoming increasingly violent, forcing police to fire tear gas to disperse gangs as they attempt to storm lorry parks, officials have warned.

Gilles Debove, the Calais area delegate for the French police union, said tear gas was being used to stop "mass onslaughts" on vehicles about to cross the Channel.



Migrants hold banners as they demonstrate in Calais (AFP/Getty)

"The other day, two to three hundred migrants tried to get into a lorry park and we fired tear gas to scatter them because there are too few of us to control situations like this any other way," he said.

"We're also facing an increase in crimes by migrants who mug people, steal mobile phones and carry out sexual assaults."

Police in the northern French port were overwhelmed by the steadily increasing numbers of asylum-seekers desperate to reach Britain despite the recent arrival of an extra 34 officers, he said.

Lorry parks are now ringed with razor wire and patrolled at night by guards and dogs.

But the manager of one site, Olivier Carre, said the police response to migrants was inadequate.

"Last week, a lorry entered with seven illegal immigrants," he said. "We called the police and they made them walk to the roundabout at the end of the road and went off."

Mr Debove said legal proceedings against migrants arrested for petty crimes often collapsed because of translation problems.

"When we arrest them, they speak English, but once they're charged, they refuse to speak anything but their own language and there's a

shortage of interpreters, so we're often forced to release them," he said. Under French law, suspected offenders have to understand the charges against them so they can defend themselves.



Migrants from Africa are chased by French policemen (Reuters)

Up to 1,500 migrants, most from Eritrea and other impoverished African countries, are encamped in and around Calais, where they are fed and clothed by charities.

It is often impossible to deport migrants from countries such as Eritrea, which has been under UN investigation for alleged human rights abuses including extrajudicial executions, torture and forced military conscription that can last decades.

Philippe Wannesson, who runs a blog on the situation, suggested that France should offer the illegal immigrants asylum.



Migrants and activists scuffle with police officers after French authorities started to clear out makeshift camps (Reuters)

"1,500 people aren't that many for a country like France," he said, although he acknowledged that more migrants might then be encouraged to come.

Almost all of the illegal immigrants speak English and want to settle in Britain.

A local official said a few do apply for asylum in France "so they face less trouble from the authorities here while their applications are considered, but it doesn't stop them continuing to try to get to England."

The official, who declined to be named, said some migrants had been driven to reception centres at the other end of France after making applications, only to "walk out the next morning and make their way back to Calais".

Drivers, who are fined €20,000 (£16,000) if illegal immigrants are found in their vehicles, say the migrants openly try to break into their lorries.

"The moment the lorries stop, the migrants scramble aboard, even in broad daylight," said Arnaud Dequidt of the haulier Carpentier.