News



A refugee prays Christmas day, 2015 at a camp in Calais, France. (CNS/Stephanie Lecocq, EPA)

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U.K. Catholic leaders urged the British government to accept more child refugees from northern France after reports that hundreds of young people are being forced to sleep outdoors in low temperatures.

An English and a Scottish bishop said the situation of migrants waiting in the French port of Calais for the opportunity to cross the English Channel into the United Kingdom had become increasingly perilous since the clearance of an illegal migrants' camp known as "The Jungle" a year ago. They urged the government to relax rules that limit the number of child refugees the U.K. will accept from France.

"Whilst the camp has closed, young migrants remain," said Bishop William Nolan of Galloway, president of Justice and Peace Scotland, and Auxiliary Bishop Paul McAleenan of Westminster, spokesman on migrants and asylum seekers for the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.

"Their situation is now much worse," they said in their early December statement. "These young people are forced to sleep rough, which at this time of year, as temperatures fall, is of great concern.

"Their presence is discouraged by the authorities," the bishops continued. "Police tactics include interrupting sleep and confiscating tents and sleeping bags. Aid agencies report that the policies of the British government have resulted in young people turning to people smugglers in attempts to reach the U.K.

"We urge the authorities to recognize that these are our fellow human beings, regardless of their status, and that their intrinsic dignity must be upheld," they added. "Of particular concern are unaccompanied minors whose rights as children must be recognized by both French and U.K. authorities."

The bishops said the government should "embrace the spirit of the Dubs Amendment," introduced with the aim of rescuing child migrants from France, and to extend its provisions to meet the demands of the present crisis.

The amendment to the 2016 Immigration Act takes its name from Alfred Dubs, the Labor member of the House of Lords who introduced it.

Lord Dubs, who is Jewish, had been rescued from Czechoslovakia as a child shortly before the country was overrun by Nazi Germany and was given a new home in Britain. His measure was intended to find new homes for about 3,000 unaccompanied child refugees but was scrapped by the government in February after it decided to accept just 480 of them into Britain.

A legal challenge against the cap was dismissed by the High Court in November, prompting the government to assert that its actions were lawful.

The government has consistently argued that taking migrants from France perpetuated human trafficking, and that it preferred instead to relocate some 23,000 refugees into the U.K. directly from camps in the Middle East.

In Calais, about a dozen charities and aid groups are working with migrants. These include two that are specifically Catholic -- Secours Catholique and Catholic Worker.

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Ban Bano of the U.K.-based group Seeking Sanctuary makes regular visits Calais with colleague Philip Kerton to help the migrants and refugees there.

In a Dec. 7 email to CNS, he said: "The number of people sleeping rough in and near Calais and towns and villages along the coast and near major roads has again increased a little. Exiles remain determined to come to the area and to remain there."

"Hundreds of unaccompanied child refugees are in woods around Calais, with minimal provisions and sanitation, and in constant fear of police violence and traffickers," added Bano.