
Migrant shipwreck in the English Channel. Sarah Teather (JRS-UK): "How did we reach the point of giving no value to human lives?"

"What happened is an utter disgrace, and if the latest news is true, namely that the migrants had asked for help from both the British and French authorities and were ignored, then I think that it is and extremely serious matter. *It means that human lives could have been saved, and that it was not done because those in charge feared the possible reactions to the rescue.* I think the British government is gambling with people's lives, and with the social cohesion of our country, characterised by a long tradition of welcoming everyone. **Sarah Teather**, director of the [Jesuit Refugee Service](#) in the United Kingdom, firmly denounces last week's tragic death in the English Channel of at least twenty-seven people. A former MP for Westminster, Teather has been actively advocating for the rights of migrants for many years. She heads a group of about one hundred volunteers and some twenty full-time employees, and together with her team she regularly visits asylum seekers in detention centres. "The political climate has changed in the last five years - she points out -, hostility against foreigners has increased, with growing xenophobia. Migrants are seen as opportunists who seek to exploit the system rather than people in need of help. Clearly, in this case, the fear of welcoming these people is greater than the concern to save their lives. This is very sad.

How did we reach the point of giving no value to human lives?."

Is the UK currently taking in migrants and political refugees? *Asylum applications have reached a record low number in the UK's recent past.* There were 84,102 asylum seekers in 2002 and 26,903 in March 2020. The numbers have been declining steadily. Roughly forty per cent of rejected asylum cases are overturned on appeal, as the decision-making process is poorly coordinated and the culture of suspicion of migrants is growing stronger. However, I must emphasise that government policy does not reflect the attitude of the general public. *The number of Christian parishes in the UK open to receiving refugees under the government-led programme launched in 2015 is greater than the number of people seeking asylum.* **Could you describe your refugee outreach efforts?** We mostly focus on the most disadvantaged migrants, people without means, who fell into extreme poverty as a result of the British reception process. Those people are migrants confined in detention centres as well as residents of the Napier Barracks, abandoned army barracks in Kent transformed into temporary accommodation for asylum seekers. It's a very sad place, which I visit regularly, known for the abysmal conditions in which its residents live. Migrants, many of whom have been infected with Covid, are crammed into very cold dormitories with very few clothing items. Refugees arriving in Britain in makeshift dinghies are swiftly transferred from detention centres to hotels or to places like the Napier Barracks. *But the saddest thing is that with each transfer, these people are frustrated in their capacity not only of asserting their rights through the legal system, but also of receiving medical assistance.* This is a serious matter because in many cases these persons are victims of torture. **Do you manage to help them?** *We assist asylum seekers in the legal stage, but they are still not granted refugee status and are therefore denied access to benefits.* We offer them legal assistance to obtain the financial support they are entitled to. In the meantime, we provide them with food, medical care and clothing, as well as accommodation with families, individuals or parishes. We accompany these people and try not to make them feel abandoned, while involving them in activities that alleviate their isolation.