

French Government Report Hints at Police Misconduct in Calais

By Elian Peltier

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PARIS — A Human Rights Watch report this summer accused the French police of “gratuitously and systematically” using pepper spray on migrants, including children, in the northern French city of Calais and routinely confiscating their sleeping bags and other belongings.

Although the police disputed that account after it was released in July, a 70-page report by the Interior Ministry published earlier this week found “it plausible that there was a breach in security force doctrine and ethics.”

“Even though it doesn’t represent formal proof,” the ministry’s report said, testimony indicated that there had been “an abusive use of tear gas” by the police on at least one occasion and that the police had not shown their identification on other occasions, the report’s authors said.

The Interior Ministry report again raises questions about the French government’s treatment of the hundreds of migrants who gathered in Calais, hoping to cross the English Channel to Britain.

A year after the dismantling of “the Jungle,” a sprawling encampment where 6,000 to 8,000 people lived in tents and improvised shelters, the authorities have made numerous efforts to discourage migrants from traveling to Calais.

Yet 500 to 700 migrants — mostly Afghans, Eritreans, Ethiopians and Pakistanis — still live there, many outdoors in squalid surroundings, according to human rights organizations that add that living conditions have worsened since last fall.



Migrants in Calais faced off against French police officers last October, when the huge encampment known as the Jungle was razed. Jack Taylor/Getty Images

Since he was elected in May, President Emmanuel Macron has repeatedly said that while his government would provide the minimum to those in need, he did not want large numbers of migrants gathering in one spot. Among his proposals was to open European-run reception areas in Africa.

After a camp burned down in April in Grande-Synthe, 24 miles north of Calais, Gérard Collomb, the interior minister, refused to let a new one be built. Instead, four centers have been operating in the north, with a capacity to accommodate 300 asylum seekers.

But humanitarian organizations have denounced the lack of resources and what they call police harassment toward migrants who want to travel to Britain instead of seeking asylum in France.

Bénédicte Jeannerod, the director of Human Rights Watch in France, said that the Interior Ministry's report was "consistent with what we have described and they go in the right direction."

"But now the Ministry of Interior must take some measures, and abuses must stop," Ms. Jeannerod said in a telephone interview.

This month, United Nations experts told the French authorities to provide more drinking water and sanitation, after the right-wing mayor of Calais had refused.

"It is worrying that approximately 700 migrants in Calais and the immediate area temporarily rely on only 10 portable lavatories and water from 10 taps," Léo Heller, a United Nations special envoy, said in a United Nations report.



French riot police officers in the sprawling Calais encampment called the Jungle as it was being demolished last October. Mauricio Lima for The New York Times

The Interior Ministry said its investigation had uncovered the use of tear gas against

at least one volunteer during a food distribution to migrants, at close range and without warning. Although the authors concluded that the use of tear gas should be “strictly supervised,” they denied that pepper spray had been used.

“It doesn’t change the nature of the abuse,” Ms. Jeannerod of Human Rights Watch said. “What matters to us is the disproportionate and unjustified use of gas, whether you call it pepper spray or tear gas,” she added.

The I.G.P.N., a police body that investigates the French police forces and the co-author of the report, refused to comment further. The Interior Ministry did not respond to requests for comment.

Arguing in a news release that the most serious accusations brought by Human Rights Watch were unfounded, the ministry praised the actions of the police, highlighting the harsh working conditions in Calais.

It said that 44 police officers were hurt in 2016 in Calais, and 10 since the beginning of this year, but did not say whether those injuries occurred during clashes with migrants.

Although tensions in Calais have lessened since the report came out in July, the level of mistrust remains high between the police on one side, and the organizations and migrants on the other, according to Maya Konforti, a volunteer with L’Auberge des Migrants, a group distributing food and clothes in Calais.

In its report, the Interior Ministry suggested that police officers wear body cameras and that they participate in meetings with organizations and local authorities, a suggestion that Ms. Konforti welcomed.

“They have to hunt down people all day long, sometimes during the night,” Ms. Konforti said of the police, describing a game of cat and mouse in which both migrants and members of the security forces face high levels of stress. “The cats sometimes get angry, the mice sometimes taunt the cats. On both sides, it has become an unbearable game.”