

France bulldozes refugee camp's church, mosque

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February 2, 2016

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(RNS) A church and mosque in a French camp for migrants and refugees have been destroyed, despite authorities' reportedly promising not to demolish the places of worship.

Bulldozers moved into the camp in Calais, the departure point for ferries to Great Britain, on Monday (February 1) and tore down the mosque, which reportedly drew up to 300 worshippers each day, and St. Michael's Church, a makeshift chapel serving mainly Orthodox Ethiopian Christians.

Residents of the camp were given just a few minutes to collect their belongings before the demolition took place around 9 a.m. local time, the charity Help Refugees UK reported.

"Devastated residents watched the destruction," the charity wrote on its Facebook page. "The bulldozers are currently tearing down the Church, while residents scramble to rescue what they can from the building."

Images published online by the charity were described as showing Christians praying in the remains of the church, and one man standing holding the building's cross.

"There was just time for a last minute prayer before the machinery tore in," the organization reported in an update. "The pastor stood by in dignified silence, clutching the remaining cross from the Church roof."

The camp has become one of the focal points of Europe's migration crisis; more than 1 million people arrived in the region by sea last year. The majority were from the world's top refugee-producing countries, according to U.N. figures.

French authorities started dismantling the French camp in January, moving up to 1,500 residents into converted shipping containers. Despite the broader plans, Help Refugees UK said there was no warning that places of worship were to be destroyed.

An episode of the BBC's *Songs of Praise*, a long-running program of hymns, was filmed in the church in August. The decision sparked both praise and criticism from British viewers, who either celebrated the move to draw attention to the Calais camp or accused the BBC of pushing a political agenda.