

British government dispatches Royal Navy to stop cross-Channel refugee boats

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The UK Conservative government is dispatching the Royal Navy to the English Channel to stop refugees and asylum seekers attempting to make the hazardous 21-mile (35-kilometre) crossing from France in small boats and dinghies. The Channel is one of the world's busiest sea lanes.

The naval patrol ship HMS Mersey has been deployed to assist two Border Force cutters that were sent earlier this week by Home Secretary Sajid Javid. These will join a cutter and two smaller coastal patrol vessels already in the area. Javid declared that “covert” action would be taken in France to disrupt people-smuggling gangs.

The sight of destitute men, women and children being sent back to France, or rounded up on English beaches, is a heart-rending echo of the terrible tragedy that has befallen millions in the Middle East and elsewhere. Sixteen years of the “war on terror”—the pretext for a renewal of colonialist war and plunder—have produced the greatest migration crisis since World War II. More than 65 million people are refugees and 15 million are internally displaced.

And yet a filthy right-wing anti-immigration campaign is being manufactured around the minuscule number of desperate souls—539 in total—who tried to cross the Channel in 2018.

At first Javid and his Home Office officials were reluctant to send in patrol ships, claiming that the prospect of being rescued would encourage more refugees to cross. However, increased pressure came from Conservative MPs and the media, which repeatedly hyped up a looming “migrant crisis.” Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* demanded, “We must stem the tide of migrant boats crossing the Channel.”

Javid was forced to break off his South African safari holiday (£840 a night) to return to Britain. On the

grounds that 80 percent of crossings in 2018 had been made in the last three months, he declared a “major incident.”

Javid told Sky News, “Our job here is to make sure this doesn't turn into a new route for ever-increased illegal migration, so I want to stop it now as much as I possibly can.” He railed against the “illegal” migrants for not seeking asylum in “safe” France.

“Why have you not sought asylum in the first safe country that you arrived in?” Javid demanded. “Because France is not a country where anyone would argue it is not safe in any way whatsoever ...”

Javid's tirade was wrong on all counts. Seeking asylum is a right enshrined in international law. The 1951 refugee convention states that “refugees should not be penalised for their illegal entry or stay” and acknowledges “that the seeking of asylum can require refugees to breach immigration rules.”

The sea-crossings are a desperate response to the closing down of other routes by the governments in Britain and across Europe. The number of people granted asylum in the UK has plummeted by 26 percent in the past year to a mere 4,981. More than half of applicants are refused entry. Many, according to Ciaran Price, public affairs officer at Asylum Aid, are refused because the Home Office expects them “to obtain impossible proof—like birth certificates they may have left behind in the middle of the night when fleeing violence, or evidence documenting graphic details of sexual violence.”

Javid's whipping up of hysteria over the Channel boat people also has an immediate political aim in whipping up the most right-wing forces with Brexit approaching. During the 2016 referendum campaign leading to the narrow vote to leave the European Union (EU), xenophobic anti-immigrant sentiment united both

the Leave and Remain camps. For Remain, then Prime Minister David Cameron promised agreement with the EU to ensure Fortress Europe would keep out migrants, while the Leave campaign made its central appeal to “take back control of our borders” and restrict free movement of labour.

Prime Minister Theresa May has made tighter immigration controls a central feature of her Brexit policy. Last month, the government announced a white paper on immigration after the Brexit transition period, currently set as January 2021, but which could be imposed as early as this April if May fails to get her EU exit deal agreed by Parliament this month. Under the proposals, “highly skilled” migrants and those with family here already will only be allowed in under much stricter criteria, and low-skilled workers will find it almost impossible. Javid has made it clear that no one allowed to enter the UK under the new system will have the “right to access public funds, or to settle permanently in the UK.”

As Javid made his announcement about “safe” France, refugee charity Auberge des Migrants posted a picture of French police officers destroying three makeshift camps and tweeted, “On January 1, 2019, nothing has changed in Calais”—a reference to the notorious bulldozing of the so-called “Jungle” refugee camp and the forced removal of its 6,400 inhabitants in 2016 by the then Socialist Party government.

Since then, President Emmanuel Macron’s government has stepped up the persecution of refugees and migrant workers. It has created special anti-migrant task forces, intensified controls in the Mediterranean and reinforced border security at Calais and other ports. Last year, the French National Assembly passed the repressive Asylum-Immigration Bill, paving the way for further draconian attacks on refugees and asylum seekers.

According to Auberge des Migrants’ Maya Konforti, life for most migrants on the French coast is now “truly catastrophic.” She explained, “The police dismantle whatever people manage to put up, every other day. It’s psychological harassment, unbelievably stressful. They can’t ever settle, they struggle to keep what little they have. ... So yes, you can say they are desperate.”

Jaber, who arrived in Calais four months ago from Iran and has not seen his wife and children in Manchester for two years, told the *Guardian* “the other

ways are all blocked now. There are people who have been here two years and tried more than 100 times to get on a lorry. This is the only way now.”

Many of those attempting the “now or never” Channel crossing are, like Jaber, skilled Iranian workers. They have made up the highest number of asylum applications to the UK every year for the past three years. They have sought to escape the devastating social conditions inflicted on their homeland by Western imperialism and join their families among the small 70,000 Iranian population in Britain.

This can only get worse as a result of the decision in November by the Trump administration, escalating its aggressive “America First” global agenda, to impose new sanctions on Iran that are designed to collapse its economy, starve its people into submission and overturn its government in order to impose a subservient pro-US regime. The threat of military action hangs over Iran if it persists in defying US diktats.

Javid’s vicious response to the desperate Channel refugees and whipping up of national chauvinist poison as Brexit approaches is a damning expression of the bankruptcy of the capitalist nation-state system. It goes hand in hand with the erection of trade barriers and a new eruption of trade and currency wars, as the bourgeoisie in every country seeks to resolve its crisis at the expense of its rivals and the working class.

The failure of the “labour movement”—Corbyn in Britain, Mélenchon in France, Lafontaine in Germany and Bernie Sanders in the US—to defend the principle of free movement of workers, in many instances even calling for the reinforcing of borders, supposedly to protect native-born workers, facilitates the efforts of their governments to foment hatred of immigrants. This only has the outcome of splitting the working class and diverting attention from the real source of workers’ suffering, the capitalist system.



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