

Johnson government deploys armed forces against refugees making Channel crossings

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Under the political leadership of Home Secretary Priti Patel, British armed forces are being deployed against refugees crossing the Channel from France in rubber dinghies and small boats.

These inhumane, illegal, and xenophobic measures must be opposed. What is being legitimised is a further evisceration of the right to asylum and the use of the state to terrorise those displaced by hardship and persecution, including many who have fled wars in their homelands instigated or backed by the British ruling elite.

The Ministry of Defence has deployed RAF surveillance aircraft to assist the Border Patrol off the south coast. This has been described as an “initial offer of assistance.” A formal request has been made by the Home Secretary for the active intervention of the Royal Navy.

Patel has created a new position, the Clandestine Channel Threat Commander, whose role will be to work closely with the French state in policing the Channel against refugees. She has appointed Dan O’Mahoney, a former Royal Marine who served in Kosovo and Iraq. A government press release states that he “will have the primary responsibility of making the Channel route unviable for small boat crossings.”

The deployment of the Royal Navy to hound and drive back lightweight vessels, overcrowded, and unfit for sea crossing will result in disaster. It is a breach of maritime law, which stipulates that those at risk of drowning at sea must be rescued.

On Monday, Prime Minister Boris Johnson stated that current law was too restrictive over deportations and described the Channel crossings made by desperate refugees as “very bad and stupid and dangerous and criminal.” This is a more appropriate description of Johnson and his government.

There is a large element of political distraction involved in the revival of anti-refugee witch hunting. The resort once again to stoking anti-migrant sentiment and

xenophobia is dictated by the fact that the government is backed into a corner, faced with rising social anger over its incompetent and criminal handling of COVID-19.

The biggest threat to the British people is not the arrival of a few hundred refugees on the shorelines of its southern coast, but the present occupant of Number 10 Downing Street. The Johnson government has been responsible for turning the UK into the epicentre of the pandemic in Europe in terms of excess deaths and is plunging society headlong into a resurgence of the virus through its return to work policy and reopening of schools.

The number of those undertaking the Channel crossings has risen, but from a low baseline. In the year up to August 7, 4,000 refugees made landings on the UK coast on 300 boats. Last Thursday 235 people landed.

The hysteria mounted against the refugees is not solely the preserve of the right-wing media such as the *Express*, *Telegraph* and *Daily Mail*. The *Independent* writes in terms of a “surge” and the BBC adopts a shrill tone, describing a couple of a hundred people as “record numbers.”

This serves to create the impression that managing the inflow of refugees is an impossible task, while desensitising public opinion over their plight. The claims that the clampdown is motivated by a desire to prevent refugees from drowning and falling foul to criminal gangs are rank hypocrisy. The barriers which governments around the world have erected against the right to asylum have forced refugees into taking desperate action.

The Channel is one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world, with strong currents which makes undertaking the 20-mile crossing particularly hazardous. Those who undertake the Channel crossing are from the most impoverished and war-torn parts of the globe. According to the BBC, recent arrivals have included entire families from Yemen, Eritrea, Chad, Egypt, Sudan, and Iraq.

Based on the overall figures for immigration last year to the UK, the number of unauthorised Channel arrivals does not even represent a percentage point. The UK also receives far fewer asylum seekers than other European Union (EU) countries such as Germany, France, and Spain. In 2019, there were 49,000 asylum applications in the UK, a third or just over a half of those for the EU countries cited.

Earlier in the year the government launched Operation Sillath to speed up the deportations of refugees back to France. This is conducted under the terms of the Dublin regulations of the EU on asylum, which make refugees the responsibility of the first country they reach. In May, the *Guardian* reported evidence compiled by human rights lawyers and campaigners that the government was denying asylum seekers the right to have their applications considered in the UK, deporting them back to France without any proof they had made an original claim there, or spent any time in that country.

Lily Parrott, a lawyer at Duncan Lewis solicitors stated, “We feel that this is being done illegally and on the basis of a conflation between the Dublin convention and a UK-France treaty about border management. This would be an egregious breach of European Law that allowed many asylum-seekers to be wrongly removed from the UK.”

Since 2019, the UK has deported 155 refugees back to France, around 3 percent of those that landed on the south coast.

The Johnson government takes its political cue from the far right of the political spectrum. For months, former Brexit leader Nigel Farage has mounted a media campaign vilifying the government for losing control of the UK’s borders. This has included video footage of his boat patrols around the Channel and tours of southern ports in which he has portrayed himself as the single-handed champion of the national interest against an “invasion.” Video footage has included Farage identifying a distressed light-weight vessel in the Channel at risk of sinking. When they were rescued, he denounced the Border Patrol as “an illegal migrant taxi service.”

This virulent campaign is now being politically mainstreamed. The BBC primetime TV newscast Monday reported, “On land, at seas and in the air. Today the government sought to assure its citizens that it can control its borders.” The report cut to an aerial shot of the Home Secretary aboard a police patrol boat stating that Priti Patel’s involvement was “to underline her determination against the breaching of UK sovereignty.”

The harassment and vilification of refugees from the

most oppressed and impoverished corners of the globe is in marked contrast to the Johnson government’s official open door policy extended to 2.9 million Hong Kong citizens. The right to asylum applies only to the extent that it provides a fig-leaf for the British ruling class in its alliance with the US against China, and for stepped-up measures of trade war and military confrontation.

In the face of this witchhunt, there has been no principled opposition mounted by the Labour Party. Apart from occasional handwringing about the plight of refugees, the Labour Party has focused on complaints that Brexit will endanger continued cooperation between the British and French governments over efforts to clampdown on asylum seekers. Dianne Abbott, former shadow Home Secretary under Jeremy Corbyn, told the BBC, “These things were bound to get more difficult as we prepared to leave the EU. What I’m saying is in the medium term and the long term, there has to be better cooperation across the EU. That is the only solution, otherwise whenever the weather is better and the seas are calmer, you’re going to have these desperate people trying to cross the Channel.”

These comments were celebrated by the right-wing *Express* newspaper, which provided Abbott with prominent coverage.

The defence of open borders and the right to asylum is an integral part of the fight for democratic rights and against capitalism. The division of the world into rival nation-states dominated by the most powerful imperialist powers, who have driven millions from their homes through environmental disasters, famine and war, is the main barrier to human progress. It is the irrationality of this system and its subordination of technological progress to the extraction of wealth by an oligarchy that has prevented a socially progressive response to the pandemic and resulted in a humanitarian disaster.



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