Sudanese refugee drowns attempting to cross English Channel

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A Sudanese refugee was found dead on Wednesday morning, washed up on the beach of Sangatte, near Calais in France. It emerged that he died after attempting, with another refugee, the treacherous Channel crossing from France to the UK.

The victim, initially identified as a 16-year-old boy, has since been named as Abdulfatah Hamdallah. Also known as Wajdi, the *Guardian* reported that family members told its reporters that he was 22. The family members said he had his claim for asylum in France refused recently, and risked the dangerous sea crossing seeking a better life than the "horror" he had lived in. He reportedly told a cousin in Calais that he might not see him again.

It is understood that the two refugees attempted the crossing in a tiny three-foot inflatable dinghy and were using shovels as oars. According to reports, a shovel blade accidently punctured the boat. The Guardian cited Charles Devos, head of a Calais rescue service, who said the boys were in "a small boat that you can find in supermarkets and that you inflate by mouth... Crossing the Channel in that was impossible. The wash from ferries passing at 22 knots would have capsized it."

The *Mail* reported, "A night fisherman on the shoreline spotted the boat sinking and immediately called the emergency services."

The *Guardian* reported, "At 1.09am, a regional search and rescue operational centre was alerted that a migrant was on the Sangatte beach. In a state of hypothermia, he was immediately treated and taken to hospital in Calais." In initial statements, the refugee confirmed that the dingy had capsized and his friend was still in the water and could not swim. "At 8am French time, the border police were told a 'lifeless body' had been found on the beach at Sangatte."

The *Times* reported, "A beach walker found the body after dawn at Sangatte, near the mouth of the Channel tunnel. … The dead youth was identified by his friend and from his passport, which was on his body."

Such desperate measures are commonly undertaken by refugees and migrants fleeing the horrors of their devastated homelands. Those attempting the journey have even done so in garden paddling pools. One man attempted to swim to the UK through the 21-mile Channel with empty lemonade bottles strapped to his body as a makeshift flotation device. Kayaks and small wooden rowing boats are being increasingly used in one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world.

The death of Abdulfatah and near death of his companion are another tragedy resulting from the displacement of millions of people throughout the Middle East and Africa by imperialist-inspired wars over resources, geopolitical advantage and famine.

The population of South Sudan has suffered years of civil wars since declaring independence from Sudan in 2011. South Sudan has around about 1.6 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), some living in densely packed tent camps inside UN peacekeeping bases. A further 2.2 million refugees are displaced in neighbouring countries. Uganda has over 1.6 million refugees, three quarters of them from South Sudan. More than half of the population of oil-rich South Sudan faces acute food insecurity, while the leading causes of death are treatable diseases and conditions like malaria, tuberculosis and diarrhoea.

The death sparked a war of words between the French and British authorities over which country was responsible. The MP for Calais, Pierre-Henri Dumont, asked, "How many more dramas will it take for the British to regain an ounce of humanity? The inability to apply for asylum in Great Britain without being physically present is causing these tragedies."

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Speaking to *Channel 4 News*, UK Conservative MP Tim Loughton declared, “It is appalling that the French are allowing people to endanger their lives. … That is where the lack of humanity is, I’m afraid.”

As soon as these crocodile tears were shed, both countries got down to the agenda of how best to strengthen their borders to stop migration. The media were on hand to lend support, with fascists utilising the comments section of a *Daily Mail* article on Abdulfatah’s deaths to rejoice.

This month, UK Home Secretary Priti Patel created a new post, the Clandestine Channel Threat Commander, tasked with making the “Channel route unviable for small boat crossings.”

Marlène Schiappa, France’s citizenship minister, claimed in a tweet that the death of Abdulfatah was an “unbearable tragedy [that] moves us even more with [French Interior Minister] Gérald Darmanin against smugglers who take advantage of the distress of human beings.”

Responding to Schiappa, Patel tweeted, “This horrendous incident serves as a brutal reminder of the abhorrent criminal gangs and people smugglers who exploit vulnerable people.”

The fact is there were no people smugglers involved in the latest tragedy, with the lies of Schiappa and Patel aimed at absolving their respective governments of any responsibility and justifying a yet more brutal clampdown on migrants.

A few hundred desperate people attempting boat crossings from France to the UK have elicited hysteria about the country being subjected to an “invasion” in the pages of the right-wing media. Earlier this month, the UK’s Ministry of Defence was mobilised to deploy RAF surveillance aircraft to assist the Border Patrol off the UK’s south coast, and the intervention of the Royal Navy was demanded.

The vitriol is aimed at whipping up the most backward, right-wing layers through the scapegoating of immigrants and asylum seekers for all social ills as the government seeks to scale up its attacks on the working class.

Last Sunday, a thug attacked a migrant on a beach at the village of Kingsdown, near Deal in Kent. The assault took place only minutes after the migrant landed in a rubber dinghy. Only hours previously, Natalie Elphicke, Conservative MP for Dover & Deal, demanded that the government “stopped and returned” migrant boats back to France. She shed crocodile tears for the death of Abdulfatah when, just hours before after watching eight migrants come ashore at Cliffe, she said, “This is unacceptable that people are breaking into Britain in this way.”

Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage has spent weeks whipping up the same xenophobic sentiment against an “invasion” of the English coastline by a few people in dinghies and rowing boats.

There is nothing more degrading and hypocritical in this context than the handwringing by the liberal media and various Labour MPs over the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees. They are all in agreement that what is taking place with the Channel crossings is “illegal” and, at most, can only bring themselves to demand “safe and legal” routes to the UK to be enforced by a ferociously anti-immigrant Tory government.

It is only a few months ago that the Labour Party and nominally liberal figures at the *Guardian* were up in arms as Johnson announced a tightening of immigration policy that shored up the “hostile environment” agenda of his predecessor, Theresa May.

The agenda now being embraced by the entire political establishment can only facilitate further horrors and more deaths. Underscoring the scale of the catastrophe facing immigrants and asylum seekers, the death of the Sudanese young man took place as the mass deaths of at least 45 people, including five children, took place off the coast of Libya. They perished on a boat headed towards the EU southern border. This was the highest death toll yet among the more than 300 who have already died this year trying to reach Europe from Libya. The deaths continue to mount, with Spain confirming on Wednesday that the bodies of 10 migrants had been found in a semi-submerged boat near the Canary Islands.

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