

UK government accelerates “hostile environment” against immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers

Simon Whelan
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The Conservative government’s “hostile environment” policy for immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers went into overdrive in the run up to Britain leaving the European union (EU) on December 31. Millions of pounds of taxpayers’ money was authorized to enforce deportations of asylum seekers before the end of the Brexit transition period.

According to research based on freedom of information requests conducted by the *Independent*, “£2.3m was spent on forcibly removing 225 people to European countries in July, August and September this year—double the amount spent on deportation flights in the previous quarter, when 285 people were removed. Some deportation charter flights carried “only a few people onboard.”

The data showed, “On average, the cost of removing each deportee—many of whom were asylum seekers—was just over £10,100, compared with £3,900 in the second quarter of the year. As a comparison, a commercial flight ticket from the UK to Australia costs just over £900.

“Some of the charter flights that have left the UK since July 2020 took off with a fraction of the plane’s capacity onboard, with flights to Finland and Sweden carrying six and five people respectively, and one to France carrying a single deportee.”

Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s government is stepping up its policing of the English Channel in alliance with the Macron government in France. Last Saturday, the UK’s Border Force intercepted a boat off the Sussex coast with a reported 35 migrants onboard including children. Five people were reportedly injured.

According to the *Daily Mail*, “The Home Office said that UK authorities dealt with six incidents involving 103 people on Saturday, while French authorities prevented three boats with 29 people on board entering UK waters.”

The hostile policies have resulted in 29 deaths during

2020 in Home Office accommodation, according to the *Guardian*, who obtained the figure from a freedom of information request. The identities of most of those who died have not been made public and the circumstances of their deaths are unclear.

On November 9 Mohamed Camera, 27 years old, from the Ivory Coast was found dead in his room in Home Office accommodation in a north London hotel. One of his friends who travelled from Calais with him on a small boat told the *Guardian*, “He was a nice, sociable person. He was smiling when we reached the UK because he believed that now he was going to have another life.”

A Home Office spokesperson confirmed the death of Camera and officials said they were “saddened” by it.

An inquest jury found on November 30 that the death of Oscar Okwurime, a Nigerian man, resulting from a subarachnoid haemorrhage was considered “unnatural” and that neglect contributed to his death.

Another asylum seeker who died last year was 41-year-old Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah Alhabib, who fled Yemen and was found dead in a Manchester hotel room on August 6. Alhabib arrived on British shores on a small boat with 15 other people from Yemen, Syria and Iran. After being picked up by the UK Border Force, Home Office officials detained them at the notorious Yarl’s Wood immigration removal centre in Bedfordshire for three days before shifting them to Manchester.

Another asylum seeker who travelled with Alhabib said, “All of us on these journeys, we have lost our country, lost our family, lost our future. When we got into the boat in Calais we felt the sea was the only place left for us to go”.

Clare Moseley, founder of the Care4Calais charity, told the *Guardian*, “It’s shameful that more refugees die here in the UK, in Home Office accommodation, than do so in

Calais or trying to cross the Channel.

“But the way we treat them in this country is cruel. Our government doesn’t give them the basics of life like adequate food and clothing. It locks them up in military barracks and keeps them isolated and depressed in hotels. It keeps them under constant threat of deportation, instead of processing their asylum applications promptly.”

Graham O’Neill, policy manager for the Scottish Refugee Council, told the media there is no Home Office public policy regarding the deaths of refugees and asylum seekers. There is no facility to offer support with funeral costs or repatriation of the body, nor is there any proactive learning mechanism to prevent sudden or unexplained deaths.

The day before the death toll of asylum seekers was published, a high court judge ruled that the Home Office was in breach of its duties to protect the human rights of asylum seekers against homelessness. Judge Knowles found the Home Office was responsible for a wholesale failure to monitor and implement a £4 billion contract awarded to several private companies over a 10-year period, leading to unlawful delays in provision of accommodation.

Freedom of information responses from the Home Office obtained by the Scottish Refugee Council found that between January and March 2020, 83 percent of Home Office properties to accommodate asylum seekers had defects and 40 percent of the defects were so serious they made the properties uninhabitable. The defects were identified by Home Office inspectors.

The judge found that the five claimants in the case, asylum-seekers considered by the Home Office to be “highly vulnerable” and eligible for housing support, had been rendered homeless for prolonged periods. In one case a severely disabled man was forced to live and sleep on friends’ settee and at times on the streets near the renal clinic he attended for kidney dialysis because the government failed to move him into suitable housing. The Home Office assessed him as needing level access accommodation and accepted that this should be close to his dialysis clinic. However, it took nine months and three applications to the court before this was provided.

Justice Knowles ruled that in breach of the law the Home Office had failed to monitor the provision of accommodation to disabled migrants and discriminated unlawfully against the man by subjecting him to shoddy treatment because of his disability. Disabled peoples’ needs were “insufficiently identified, information about those needs is insufficiently shared, and those needs are

insufficiently addressed within the system that is being used”.

In December 19, the High Court ruled that the Home Office is unlawfully preventing asylum seekers from seeking paid employment while they await a decision on their application. Justice Bourne ruled that Home Office policy guidance on asylum seekers’ permission to work was unlawful because it discriminates against trafficking victims and restricts asylum seekers to certain types of employment.

Current Home Office policy states that asylum seekers may apply for permission to work after they have been waiting for a decision on their claim for more than a year. However, permission may only be granted for employment subject to Britain’s “Shortage Occupation” list, which consists predominantly of jobs requiring post graduate qualifications. These jobs comprise approximately 1 percent of British jobs opportunities.

The claimant who brought the challenge is a woman who has been recognised as a victim of domestic servitude and sexual exploitation, who applied for asylum in 2018 after absconding from her trafficker. Having waited over a year for a decision, she applied for permission to work as a cleaner and provided evidence that gainful employment would be conducive towards her psychological recovery and help prevent further exploitation. She was refused permission to work and told to look for a vacancy on the ‘Shortage Occupation’ list for which she was unqualified.

By the end of March 2020, 32,000 people had been waiting beyond six months for a decision on their initial asylum claim, a 68 percent increase on 2019 and the highest number since records began. Asylum seekers in Britain live in destitution on the £5.66 daily support allowance from the government. Research has revealed that the government could receive just short of £100 million a year, with income tax, National Insurance contributions and reduced support payments, if it lifted the ban on asylum seekers working.



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