

27 migrants confirmed dead as dinghy capsizes in English Channel

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At least 27 people died on Wednesday after an inflatable dinghy capsized in rough seas in the English Channel near to the French port city of Calais. The number killed was originally reported as 31 but was revised down by the French government on Thursday morning.

The tragedy took place Wednesday afternoon, with French fishermen reporting bodies floating motionless in the sea. Sky News reported, “Fisherman Nicolas Margolle said he had seen two small dinghies—one with people onboard and another empty. He said another fisherman had called rescuers after seeing the empty dinghy and 15 people motionless in the water.”

French Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said that 34 people had been on board the boat. “Amongst the 31 dead, as far as we know five were women and one was a little girl.” Two people were rescued and one was still missing. Of the two survivors Darmanin said, “There are two survivors... but their life is in danger—they are suffering from severe hypothermia.” He described the inflatable the migrants were in as “very frail... like a pool you blow up in your garden”.

The International Organisation for Migration said the deaths were the biggest single loss of life in the Channel since it began collecting data in 2014.

Responsibility for the deaths rests with the governments of British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and French President Emmanuel Macron. Migrants face systematic persecution by London, Paris and all of Europe’s governments after being driven into exile by imperialist wars and terrible hardship. This year more than 25,700 people have attempted the hazardous journey to the UK via the Channel, the world’s busiest shipping lane, in small boats and inflatables. This is a rise of more than 300 percent. Around 25 crossings were attempted yesterday alone.

The scale of death can be seen in the fact that the previous highest number of migrants killed in a single incident in the Channel was five Kurdish-Iranians who drowned in October last year. The 27 deaths are almost double the total of 14 people who have perished this year trying to cross the Channel from France.

London and Paris were at one in insisting that people smugglers were responsible for the deaths and that a harsher clampdown on migration was the answer.

Darmanin gave a press conference from Calais confirming the deaths as the “the biggest (migrant) tragedy that we have seen,” before declaring, “It is an appalling situation for France, for Europe and for humanity to see these people perish at sea because of people smugglers.”

He even boasted that since the start of 2021, around 1,500 arrests have been made including four today linked to the drownings.

“France will not let the Channel become a cemetery,” said President Macron, before promising to “find and condemn those responsible” and calling for an “emergency meeting of European ministers concerned by the migration challenge”.

Prime Minister Jean Castex also insisted that those who died are victims of “criminal smugglers”.

On Wednesday afternoon, Prime Minister Johnson convened a meeting of the government’s emergency COBRA committee. Afterwards Johnson said he was “shocked and appalled and deeply saddened by the loss of life at sea in the Channel... But I also want to say that this disaster underscores how dangerous it is to cross the Channel in this way.”

Further action was needed to stop “gangsters,” he said, ‘We’ve had difficulties persuading some of our partners—particularly the French—to do things in a way in which we think the situation deserves. The operation

that has been conducted by our friends on the beaches, supported with £54 million from the UK, to help patrol the beaches, all the technical support we have been giving, they haven't been enough.”

He made clear the government would use the tragic deaths to speed up the passage of draconian anti-immigration legislation through parliament, adding, “And that’s why it’s so important that we accelerate if we possibly can all the measures contained in our Borders and Nationalities Bill, so that we distinguish between people who come here legally and people who come here illegally.” The legislation effectively criminalises migrants and asylum seekers seeking to enter the UK via the Channel.

Home Secretary Priti Patel, author of the legislation, said the deaths serve “as the starkest possible reminder of the dangers of these Channel crossings organised by ruthless criminal gangs. It is why this government’s new plan for immigration will overhaul our broken asylum system and address many of the long-standing pull factors encouraging migrants to make the perilous journey from France to the United Kingdom.”

The Nationality and Borders Bill is described by the Freedom From Torture organisation as “the biggest legal assault on international refugee law ever seen in the UK”.

The opposition Labour Party has no fundamental differences with the Tories, epitomised by Sir Keir Starmer’s denouncing Patel for delivering “absolutely nothing” by not securing “strong enough agreements with France” to do “the work upstream.”

Shadow Home Secretary Nick Thomas-Symonds told the BBC on the news of yesterday’s deaths, “It is unrealistic to think that the entirety of that coastline can be patrolled. We need to be looking at practical law enforcement action away from the coast as well. We need that wider joint law enforcement work with the French authorities to be disrupting further away from the coast.”

In stark contrast, migrant charities pointed the finger of blame squarely at Johnson, Macron and their European counterparts.

Zoe Gardener from the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants told the BBC there is “no requirement on people to seek asylum in the first country they reach. Of course there isn’t, otherwise nobody would end up seeking protection in the UK.”

The UK is “very able to offer protection to lots more refugees than we currently do. So if everybody is supposed to stay in France because we’re slightly to the west of France, then France can say the same thing to Italy, and then Italy can say the same thing to Libya, and in the end, the entire international refugee protection regime will crumble.”

Beth Gardiner-Smith, CEO of Safe Passage International, called on Patel to immediately resign and for Johnson to prevent any further loss of life. “More and more people are risking the freezing, frightening journey across the Channel in small, unstable boats since the government closed safe routes to the UK last year.”

Clare Moseley, founder of Care4Calais, also insisted that the government’s focus should be upon creating a “safe and legal” way for people to claim asylum. “People smugglers are a symptom, not a cause of the problem,’ she told Sky News. “The underlying issue is the fact that if you want to claim asylum in the UK you have to be physically present here and these people don’t have a way to get here. That’s why they get in small boats.”



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