

Hundreds more lives threatened on “disintegrating” boat in Mediterranean as London and Paris cross swords over Channel migrant deaths

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Amid mutual recriminations between London and Paris over the deaths Wednesday of 27 migrants and asylum seekers in the English Channel, it was reported Thursday morning that 430 people are at imminent risk of death in a boat in the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of north Africa.

The news was reported, with hardly any media coverage, by Alarm Phone, who provide a hotline for people on boats in distress. It said, “A boat with approximately 430 people on board, including dozens of children and minors, is in severe distress in the central Mediterranean Sea.”

Alarm Phone said it was alerted to the disastrous situation the previous day by people on board: “According to them, the boat is disintegrating, and they cannot hold out much longer. Moreover, they report that several people have already died. There are over one hundred people below deck—in case of a shipwreck, they would be trapped inside the vessel.” It provided the co-ordinates for the vessel.

The European Union (EU) was unmoved, with Alarm Phone reporting that it “has repeatedly informed European authorities in Italy and Malta. MRCC [Maritime Rescue Co-ordination Centres] Rome has informed us that they were not the ‘competent authority’ in this case, while... Malta simply hangs up the phone when we try to relay information on the case.”

After Wednesday’s preventable deaths, the attitude to the Mediterranean Sea boat underscores the criminality of the anti-immigration policies pursued by all the European governments. As this crisis unfolded, Britain and France stepped up their bitter recriminations following the deaths resulting from a flimsy inflatable dingy capsizing off the French port city Calais. Those on board were trying to reach the UK.

On Thursday morning the French government, who initially reported that 31 people had died, revised the figure down to 27—still the largest number of dead in the Channel

since the International Organisation for Migration began systematically monitoring crossings and fatalities in 2014.

Among them were 17 men, seven women—including one who was pregnant—two boys and a girl. According to reports, most of the dead were Kurds from Iraq or Iran. Two of those rescued were from Iraq and Somalia. They are recovering from severe hypothermia. The deaths follow those of around 10 other migrants who also perished while attempting the crossing in recent weeks.

France, Britain and the entire European ruling class bear responsibility for the deaths. It is no coincidence that the origin countries of the victims—Iraq, Iran and Somalia—are those which have suffered from decades of imperialist oppression, including the 2003 invasions of Iraq and imperialist intrigues in Iran and Somalia. Millions have been left homeless and internally displaced by these crimes.

On hearing of the deaths, France and Britain swung into damage limitation mode, with government figures from each country declaring that all responsibility fell on “people smugglers” and “gangs”. France launched a criminal investigation, with four men arrested on Wednesday and a fifth on Thursday. French President Emmanuel Macron declared, “Everything will be put in place to find and convict those responsible.”

No end of crocodile tears were shed. The European Parliament held a minute’s silence Thursday. These are representatives of the EU powers responsible for turning the continent into “Fortress Europe”, leading to the deaths of tens of thousands of migrants and asylum seekers by drowning in the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas.

On Thursday, Macron called for “an emergency meeting of EU ministers concerned by the migratory challenge”. The EU border agency Frontex should provide “immediate reinforcement” to monitor the Channel, he said.

Johnson and Macron pledged Wednesday night to “step

up” cooperation to stop deaths in the Channel, with Macron cynically requesting that Britain not exploit the deaths “for political purposes”.

Their bromides were only the signal for a tirade of accusations and nationalist outbursts on both sides of the Channel, from right-wing forces and the media.

Even before their phone call, Johnson had already accused France of being slack in monitoring its coast. “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 right-wing gutter press in Britain, who for years have scapegoated and hounded “illegal” immigrants and asylum seekers, were awash with recriminations. Alongside a photo of the remains of the flimsy dinghy in which the 27 tried to cross, the *Daily Mail* ran the online headline, “This is on you, Macron”.

The *Metro*’s front page wailed, “Why didn’t France stop them?” *The Sun* and *Daily Mail*’s print edition led with a photo of migrants taking a dingy to the shoreline with a French police car parked nearby on the beach, with the headlines, “Shameful: French police idly look on as rafts head to UK”, and “You’re letting gangs get away”. A *Daily Express* article complained, “UK has paid ‘duplicitous’ France £160m since 2015 to stop migrant boats”.

Macron was mainly concerned with parading his government’s law and order policies aimed against migrants and asylum seekers. He declared, “our security forces are mobilised day and night... Our mobilisation is total as far as our coasts are concerned.” The response to the deaths would be a “maximum mobilisation” of French forces, including deploying reservists and drones to watch the shoreline.

French interior Minister Gérald Darmanin spewed out a filthy nationalist, anti-immigrant diatribe in an interview yesterday morning with French radio station RTL, expressing more than a hint of envy at what he described as the UK’s economic advantage: “Everyone knows there are more than 1.2 million illegal immigrants in Great Britain, and that British employers use this labour force to make things that the British manufacture and consume.”

Just days before Wednesdays’ Channel deaths, he declared, “Why do people go to Calais? It’s to go to Great Britain... And why do they want to go to Great Britain? It’s because the labour market largely works in Great Britain thanks to a large army of reserves—as Karl Marx said—of people in an irregular situation but who can work at a low cost, obviously.”

He flung back accusations from Britain that France was lax in its treatment of immigrants and asylum seekers by boasting, “It is often said that France doesn’t deport enough, but we deport about 20,000 people a year.” By contrast, he

said, the U.K. “expels 6,000, four times less than France, even though there are more people and twice as many illegal immigrants.”

Calais’ right-wing mayor, Natacha Bouchart, a member of the Gaullist The Republicans party, denounced the “migratory policies” of successive French governments, and attacked the “The failure of Boris Johnson who obliges our country to endure this situation because he doesn’t have the courage to assume his own responsibilities ... in his country”.

In his comments, Macron claimed that in order to prevent death, “[A]bove all, we need to seriously strengthen cooperation ... with Belgium, the Netherlands, Britain and the European Commission.”

Such cooperation will be based on the most ruthless suppression of the democratic rights of migrants and asylum seekers. Speaking in Parliament, UK Home Secretary Priti Patel stated that Channel crossings were “illegal”, adding, “I’ve offered to work with France to put [UK] officers on the ground [on the French coasts] to “to prevent these dangerous journeys from taking place.”

Patel’s Home Office is pushing through the draconian Nationality and Borders Bill, which is a declaration of war against established international law regarding the treatment of asylum seekers. As part of this onslaught, Patel is moving to impose a “pushback” policy, authorising the UK’s Border Force to turn back migrant boats and said in Parliament that she will “do whatever is necessary to secure the area” to stop sailings reaching Britain. “I have not ruled anything out” she warned, noting that “Greece”, whose anti-immigration policies she has repeatedly hailed as exemplary, “are using pushback”.

According to the *Times*, Johnson met a group of Tory MPs on Wednesday to assure them that the UK would tighten its immigration policies even further. The newspaper reported, “The prime minister left those present under the impression he was considering legal reforms to make crossings harder, something they have long demanded.” It cited one of the MPs who said, “We have to smash the merry-go-round of the asylum process.” Another of the MPs told the *Times*, “He [Johnson] agreed that we can’t just wait for the borders bill, but that we have to do something now. He told us to ‘watch this space’.”



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