

UK government plans prison ships and internment camps for asylum seekers

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When the UK government first announced plans for its Illegal Migration Bill earlier this month, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote, “If enacted, the law would deprive tens of thousands of people of their democratic rights every year and lead to the huge expansion of internment camps in Britain.”

This has very rapidly come to pass. Over the weekend and early this week, newspapers reported plans to place migrants in ferries or barges and on military sites which would hold 1,500-2,000 people each.

This was confirmed by Conservative government Immigration Minister Robert Jenrick in a statement to Parliament Wednesday. Telling MPs “accommodation for migrants should meet their essential needs and nothing more, because we cannot risk becoming a magnet for the millions of people who are displaced,” he announced old military sites would be repurposed initially in Essex, Lincolnshire and East Sussex to “collectively provide accommodation to several thousand asylum seekers through repurposed barrack blocks and Portacabins.”

Jenrick added that the government was “continuing to explore the possibility of accommodating migrants in vessels.” Deputy Prime Minister Dominic Raab told Sky News “nothing is off the table” and that “Barges would be one possible option.”

These camps and prison ships will initially be used for new arrivals but will doubtless be expanded to take the over 50,000 asylum seekers currently accommodated in nearly 400 private hotels around the country.

Tens of thousands are projected to enter the UK via a small boat crossing of the Channel in the next year. Under the Illegal Migration Bill, almost all of them will be immediately placed in a detention camp for 28 days without access to a lawyer or the opportunity to apply for bail.

This is formally pending removal to a “safe third country”. But since the UK government only has a removal agreement in place with Rwanda—with deportation flights there currently held up in the courts and which cannot take the numbers the government wishes to deport anyway—most will

find themselves in a state of permanent semi-imprisonment in Britain, deprived of access to basic social services.

According to research by the Refugee Council, up to 200,000 people, including more than 40,000 children, could be “locked up or forced into destitution,” in the *Guardian*’s reporting.

The newspaper continued, “Even if Home Office does remove 30,000 people to Rwanda, the Refugee Council estimates that between 161,147 and 192,670 people could be left in limbo.”

Defending the policy of detaining children, to be deported once they turn 18, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said it was “important that we don’t inadvertently create a policy that incentivises people to bring children who wouldn’t otherwise come here.”

Earlier this month Sunak visited France to agree a £478 million scheme to establish a detention centre in that country which would hold migrants for up to 90 days before deporting them, and a doubling to 800 of French border officers patrolling the Channel coast.

Conditions in military sites already used to hold migrants in the UK are abysmal.

The Penally (now closed), Napier and Manston sites have been condemned by inspectors, parliamentary committees and NGOs as overcrowded, lacking facilities like heating, lighting and running water, dangerous and generally inhumane. Detained migrants have suffered fires and mass outbreaks of disease. Occupants have staged repeated protests, dealt with brutally by security.

In expanding these camps and railing against the use of hotels—made necessary by the fact that successive governments have not provided enough housing for workers born in the UK, let alone migrants—the Tories are acting arm-in-arm with the far right, who have staged several small protests outside locations housing asylum seekers.

At a rally of 200 in Skegness last month, organised by the fascist group Patriotic Alternative, participants held banners reading, “Stop the invasion, we will not be replaced” and “We are being invaded,” one including the Tory campaign

slogan “Stop the Boats”.

Rosie Carter of Hope Not Hate commented at the time that the organisation has seen a “102 percent increase in far-right, anti-migrant activity in the last year,” adding, “This huge increase in far-right, anti-migrant activity doesn’t exist in a vacuum,” and pointing to the government’s “inflammatory use of language that feeds and enables the far right”.

Her point was confirmed by Tory MP Sir John Hayes on Monday, who spoke in Parliament to defend Braverman’s earlier widely condemned references to an “invasion of our Southern coast.” Hayes said, “And I do use the words ‘tide’, ‘wave’... I think the home secretary described it as a ‘swarm’... of people coming here who know they are arriving illegally, who know they are breaking the law.”

Moves are also underway in the Tory Party to make the Illegal Migration Bill even more draconian. Between 50-60 Tory MPs on the right of the party planned a rebellion in debates and votes on the legislation this Monday-Tuesday, tabling a series of amendments. Several reports noted that this was encouraged by Braverman herself.

On Monday morning, MPs Danny Kruger, Simon Clarke, and Jonathan Gullis published an article on the Conservative Home website setting out their challenges: “Does the Bill preclude Strasbourg [the European Court of Human Rights] from blocking Rwanda flights?”, “Does the Bill address those sections of the Human Rights Act that could tie up the Government in months of litigation?”, “Does the Bill appropriately limit challenges against removal?” and “Does the Bill ensure that those removed from the UK will not be returned to the UK?”

Their main amendment was aimed at ordering UK courts to ignore rulings of the European Court. But it and others were withdrawn, the three explained, after the Tory right had been “encouraged by assurances that the government will give proper consideration to our concerns” and on the “expectation of receiving this commitment from ministers in parliament”.

This was delivered by Jenrick, who closed Monday’s debate by promising to “engage closely with colleagues” and attacking “the kind of egregious and vexatious [legal] challenges that we have seen in the past”.

The *Times* reports that the concession sought by the rebels were an immediate ban on “rule 39” orders under which the European Court can make directions to any state party to the European Convention of Human Rights—a ban on migrants returning from Rwanda even if they successfully appeal their deportation; a time limit for appealing deportations of just seven days; and the invalidation of more sections of the Human Rights Act, closing down routes by which removals could be challenged.

The third and final reading of the Bill is likely scheduled for the last week of May.

While the Tory government works out the details of its anti-migrant, police state legislation, the Labour Party is chivvying from the sidelines, desperate to prove that it would far more competently handle the denial of asylum rights and deportation of migrants.

Shadow Immigration Minister Stephen Kinnock said in the debate Monday that in order for “a deterrent to be effective, it has to be credible.

“And this bill fails the credibility test because there is nowhere near enough capacity to detain asylum seekers in the UK, there is no returns agreement with the EU, and the Rwandan government is only agreeing to take thousands at some unspecified future date.

“So the boats will keep on coming, the backlog will keep on growing and the hotels will keep on filling.”

Shadow Health Secretary Wes Streeting, a leading Labour spokesperson, said likewise on Wednesday, “The government would rather give the appearance about doing something than stopping small boats. Speeding up claims, deporting people when their claims are unsuccessful, that’s the way to tackle the problem with the immigration system instead of spending millions housing people in hotels.”

The Tories’ repeated references to the millions of refugees in the world point to the motivations behind these dictatorial policies. Capitalism is producing disaster after disaster, from the Ukraine war to economic and climate catastrophes, uprooting vast numbers of people around the globe. The ruling class in every country, committed to austerity to fund war and bailouts for the rich, is meeting this social crisis and the enormous anger it generates with ever more brutal repression.



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