

# UK government hires barge to intern asylum seekers

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9 April 2023

The UK Home Office has announced it intends to house up to 500 isolated and vulnerable male asylum seekers in a 47-year-old “hotel barge”, the Bibby Stockholm. The vessel has previously been used to house offshore oil field and windfarm workers, and refugees seeking asylum in Germany and the Netherlands. It will be moored in Portland Harbour in Dorset.

A Home Office press release said it would “provide basic and functional accommodation” with “24/7 security in place on board”. Its 500 occupants will be held in just 222 rooms, in what a Dutch watchdog previously labeled an “oppressive environment,” notwithstanding the owners’ claims to have “refurbished”.

Portland Harbour has previously hosted a prison vessel, HM Prison Weare, between 1997 and 2005, holding as many as 400 prisoners. In 2004, the introduction to a report from the Chief Inspector of Prisons, Anne Owers, condemned the facility for depriving prisoners of fresh air and natural light and offering no space for training, exercise or education.

Owers noted that as most of the inmates were from London and the South East, the location was “particularly inaccessible” with prisoners released at a “considerable distance from home.” Even if the necessary cash was spent to keep the vessel seaworthy, it would remain “in the wrong place, with limited facilities and in a constricted environment.”

Writing for his own selfish interests to push for the barge to be relocated away from his constituency, Tory MP for South Dorset Richard Drax admitted, “There are a lot of ‘don’t knows’. Who is looking after them, what are they going to do, what are their health provisions, what happens if there’s trouble onboard?”

He added that residents would only be “allowed out on a bus every so often but in effect will be incarcerated for quite a lot of the time.” The Home Office states in a Factsheet, “If an asylum seeker were not back on site by

11pm the team would make a call to the individual,” supposedly, “to check on their welfare.”

Human rights and refugee groups have roundly condemned the announcement. Amnesty International spokesman Steve Valdez-Symonds said, “People who have escaped terror and torture, endured criminal exploitation and traumatic journeys should be treated with basic human dignity, not corralled on barges or other grossly inadequate and isolated accommodation.”

Refugee Council CEO attacked the “completely inadequate” plans to house “vulnerable people who have come to our country in search of safety, having fled beatings and death threats.”

Christina Marriot of the Red Cross told the *Guardian*, “Docked barges, which are isolated from the wider community, do not offer the supportive environment that people coping with the trauma of having to flee their homes need.”

These criticisms are made to implore the government to “fix” the asylum processing system, with Valdez-Symonds calling for claims to be “properly and consistently processed” and Solomon arguing, “There would be no need to use barges and former military bases if cases were dealt with in a timely and efficient manner.”

But the government has no intention of establishing a functioning asylum system for the thousands of desperate people forced to risk their lives crossing the English Channel. Its policy is designed to demonise, terrorise, imprison and block refugees attempting to claim their democratic right to asylum. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak underscored the point when asked about the barge, stating “I’m determined to stop the boats and will do everything I can to deliver on that.”

In doing so, the Tories are linking arms with the fascistic right, referring to “waves” and “swarms” of migrants “invading” the UK and focusing their fire on the use of hotel accommodation, at a cost of £6 million a day,

to house asylum seekers—the main topic of far-right protests in the UK.

The Home Office statement announcing the use of the barge made sure to include the dog-whistle phrases that it would “minimise the disruption to local communities,” be “more manageable and orderly” and “reduce costs,” with current accommodation of asylum seekers in hotels “now exceeding £6 million a day”.

Immigration Minister Robert Jenrick picked up the thread, ranting, “The Home Secretary and I have been clear that the use of expensive hotels to house those making unnecessary and dangerous journeys must stop. We will not elevate the interests of illegal migrants over the British people we are elected to serve.”

If Jenrick were really so concerned about the interests of the British people, he might give up two of his own three homes. The reality is that the ruling class cares as little for the working class in Britain as it does for migrants. According to Dorset Council’s own statistics, 10 of 11 areas of deprivation in the region are in the Portland and Weymouth area where the barge will be kept, which is also in the 10 percent of most deprived areas in the UK on the basis of income, employment, education, health, crime, housing services and environmental indicators.

Using the criminality of mainland’s Europe’s governments to justify his own, Jenrick continued, “We have to use alternative accommodation options, as our European neighbours are doing—including the use of barges and ferries to save the British taxpayer money and to prevent the UK becoming a magnet for *asylum shoppers* in Europe” [italics added].

The government has repeatedly claimed that the vast majority who arrive in Britain are “economic migrants” seeking better life chances and so under the current law do not have a legitimate asylum claim. But a Freedom of Information request responded to this March revealed it has absolutely no data to back this up. The Home Office’s own statistics show at least 60 percent of those who arrived in 2022 have a “legitimate” claim.

Sophie McCann, migration advocacy officer at charity Doctors Without Borders UK, told the *Guardian*: “The government has failed to provide any evidence to support claims that the majority of those trying to reach the UK are so-called economic migrants. These kinds of statements are deployed to demonise and dehumanise people seeking safety here, stirring up divisions, with real and dangerous consequences.”

The announcement of the Bibby Stockholm confirms the *World Socialist Web Site*’s warning that with its

Illegal Migration Bill, currently making its way through Westminster, the UK government is creating a network of land based and floating internment camps.

Plans are already underway to establish camps at former military sites in Scampton, Lincolnshire and Wethersfield, Essex to hold 3,700 people. Another camp is being established in Bexhill, East Sussex to hold a further 1,200 people.

Formally designed to hold arriving asylum seekers prior to deportation to a notional “safe third country,” the lack of any such destination bar Rwanda—with limited capacity and with deportations held up in the courts—means thousands will be held indefinitely in these hellholes.

The policy recalls some of the most brutal episodes in the history of British imperialism.

There are parallels between the Bibby Stockholm and the HMS Maidstone, a former submarine depot vessel refitted and used to house British troops deployed to Belfast, Northern Ireland in 1969 as part of the British operation to prop up the Unionist Northern Ireland government. In 1971, during Operation Demetrius, the British Army’s mass internment operation which rounded up hundreds of young men without trial, the Maidstone served as a prison for 122 internees who were held in cruel and overcrowded conditions.

Labour continue to back the Tories’ anti-democratic, anti-migrant policies to the hilt, only criticising the effectiveness of their implementation. Shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper complained, “Until the Government takes serious action to clear the backlog [Labour has promised it will deport more quickly] this problem is going to keep getting worse with more people in costly accommodation, not less.”

Shadow Minister For Domestic Violence Jess Phillips described the barge as “another ridiculous gimmick... excuse the pun—a tiny drop in the ocean,” which “isn’t instead of the hotels; it’s as well as the hotels.”



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