

UK abandoned 440 migrants in the Channel across just four days

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Nineteen small boats in danger in the English Channel, carrying 440 migrants between them, were abandoned by the UK authorities on just four days in early November 2021, suggests evidence obtained by the *Observer* and Liberty Investigates.

The *Observer* reported, “UK coastguard policy is to treat all reports of migrant vessels as distress incidents, meaning they require ‘immediate assistance’ – and should be found and rescued.

“But records from 3 November 2021 show incidents were closed down without staff ‘[establishing] the safety of those on board’, according to a former senior coastguard who analysed them.”

This conclusion is drawn by cross-referencing Freedom of Information (FoI) data secured from the coastguard with ship-tracking data from the Marine Traffic site. In each of the 19 incidents, “no rescue boat or helicopter belonging to the coastguard, Border Force or RNLi [Royal National Lifeboat Association, a charity] came within one nautical mile of the logged coordinates within four hours.”

Five maritime experts spoken to by the newspaper “confirmed that in the absence of an explanation from the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA), it was reasonable to conclude no help was sent.”

The fate of those abandoned is unknown, with the MCA refusing to respond to FoI requests for details of outcomes, calling them “vexatious”. The information which was released required a complaint by reporters to the information commissioner.

Immediately following the period analysed by the *Observer* and Liberty Investigates, which is affiliated to the UK’s leading human rights group Liberty on November 24, 2023—at least 27 people are known to have drowned in the worst disaster in the Channel for 30 years.

The event is still under investigation by the Marine Accident Investigation Branch, with a report due this

summer. Leaked information shows the British and French coastguards passed the buck, each refusing to respond to the emergency while claiming it was the other’s responsibility. An operation was only mounted the morning after the disaster when a fisherman found dead bodies floating in the water.

A pregnant woman and three children were among the dead. In total, according to the International Organization for Migration, 56 migrants drowned in the Channel trying to reach the UK between 2018 and 2022.

The *Observer* and Liberty’s investigation proves that what amounts to a British-French conspiracy to leave migrants to die is a regular occurrence. Reporters spoke with an Iraqi migrant whose dinghy ran out of fuel during a crossing just four days before the November 24 tragedy, leaving him and 22 others stranded.

The UK coastguard refused to send help, saying he was in French waters. This is disproved by the coordinates recorded in the agency’s own spreadsheet. He got the same response from the French coastguard. The boat’s rescue was eventually secured by the French NGO Utopia 56.

According to a separate FoI request by NGO Alarm Phone, a dinghy carrying 38 people, including children, was left adrift for 13 hours on January 2 this year in similar circumstances.

Countless government statements denouncing smugglers and traffickers for endangering lives are confirmed as rank hypocrisy. One of the most telling facts reported by the *Observer* is that, in four cases in November 2021, “reconnaissance planes and drones entered the airspace nearby” vessels in distress, “but these aircraft are incapable of providing direct assistance to those aboard small boats.” Nor did they prompt assistance to be sent.

In the five years to 2022, the UK has spent more than £1 billion on surveillance technology for use in the Channel,

according to *Tech Monitor*. Not a penny was intended towards saving lives.

Last month, *Bloomberg* ran an article, “The UK Is Using Drones to Prosecute Small-Boat Migrant Smugglers,” which cited the Home Office saying “dozens” of convictions had been secured this way. It reports that the company running the drone programme, Tekever, “has a drone than can drop a life raft if needed, but declined to say how often it had been deployed.”

Speaking to *Tech Monitor*, Dr. Leonie Ansems de Vries, chair of the Migration Research Group at King’s College London, explained smugglers would respond by not getting on the boats themselves, “instead they’ll designate another person to drive a boat and that person is often someone who’s fleeing themselves.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* has reported migrants being criminalised in this way.

Associate director of the Refugee Law Lab Petra Molnar told *Bloomberg* these threats “could drive migrants to take more dangerous routes to avoid detection, ‘potentially leading to loss of life.’”

While a billion pounds is spent on surveillance technology, and more on patrols—now with the involvement of the armed forces—and detention centres, the coastguard is kept understaffed.

According to the *Observer*, on the night of November 24, 2021, just two operational staff were on search and rescue duty in the Dover Control room—one of them a trainee. Across the whole coastguard network, between 39-45 were on duty during the day across November—below the recommended standard of 50-60, or 70-80 during points of high stress.

Far more than “illegal gangs”, it is the UK and French governments who are the chief culprits in endangering lives in the Channel, in flagrant violation of international law.

Governments have an obligation to require their ships to assist those in distress at sea. They must take responsibility for emergencies reported to them even from outside their territorial waters until a handover to another state has been confirmed. The UK’s Maritime and Coastguard Agency is a Category 1 responder for maritime emergencies under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 and a signatory to the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue.

But these are so many worthless scraps of paper to a Conservative government pursuing an unprecedented assault on the democratic rights of the working class and migrants.

Last week their police-state Illegal Migration Bill—already in breach of international law—passed its third reading in the House of Commons. The Bill, now in the House of Lords, was even more draconian with another amendment added allowing the home secretary to “disregard” orders from the European Court of Human Rights suspending the deportation of asylum seekers at risk of persecution.

Another amendment makes it so that the only means of stopping the deportation of someone refused asylum will be to “persuade a British judge” that it would lead to “serious and irreversible harm”. The government’s plan to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda as a “safe third country” has already been accepted by the High Court.

Britain’s murderous anti-migrant agenda is not unique. What the *Guardian/Observer* tries to present across its migrant coverage as a consequence of Brexit is only a different form of the same policy carried out by the European Union.

This was underscored last week when the neo-fascist Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni visited Downing Street and praised Sunak’s “fight against traffickers and clandestine immigration,” with which she “absolutely” agrees. Her government is pursuing legislation making it more difficult for humanitarian NGOs to rescue migrants in danger at sea.

Working with regimes in North Africa, the EU’s “Fortress Europe” policy has seen tens of thousands drowned in the Mediterranean in the last decade. The first three months of this year were the deadliest since 2017. More than 200 people are known to have drowned off the shore of Tunisia in just 10 days last week and the week before.

Hospitals, morgues and cemeteries in the country’s coastal regions are running out of space to bury the dead washed up on shore, with 300 found in the Sfax region alone this year.



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