

UK government steps up mass deportation of refugees and asylum seekers

Robert Stevens
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The Conservative government is intensifying its war on refugees and asylum seekers, with the announcement this week by Downing Street that two more barges will be leased for their detention.

In March the government announced plans to house 500 isolated and vulnerable male asylum seekers in a 47-year-old “hotel barge”, the Bibby Stockholm. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s announcement Monday brings the potential detainees to at least 1,500. But this is only the start of a system of many such offshore prison camps with migrants stuffed into what have been described as a shoebox-sized space. The *Guardian* reported “it is understood” that the two vessels announced by Sunak “are expected to be moored in Teesport, near Middlesbrough, and in docks near Liverpool.” It added that “sources have said that discussions over the acquisition of further barges and disused cruise ships so they can house asylum seekers in Tyneside, Essex, Suffolk and near City Airport were already taking place.”

Once onboard the ships, migrants will only be allowed to leave at specific times and be provided only a few pounds a week to spend.

Two former military bases in Wethersfield, Essex, and Scampton, Lincolnshire will also take in migrants this summer, with the number of occupants rising to about 3,000 by the autumn, according to the *Daily Mail*.

The government chose Dover on the south coast as the location for Sunak to make his announcement. At the invitation of the pro-Tory *Telegraph*, he boarded HMC Seeker, one of the Border Force vessels tasked with stopping boats in the Channel.

Sunak spoke at Western Jet Foil, an asylum seeker processing centre in Dover, and behind a podium emblazoned with the slogan “Stop the Boats”, one of his five promises for 2023, made to satisfy the most rabidly anti-immigration of his parliamentary party and wider Tory constituency. Sunak declared in Dover that the

introduction of the barges was “really important” to reduce the use of hotels to house asylum seekers, which is costing £6 million a day. He promised that the Bibby Stockholm barge would arrive to dock at Portland Port in Dorset in the next fortnight.

As well as clearing hotels being used by thousands of asylum seekers as a precursor to many being expelled from the country and never allowed to return, another sadistic plan has been devised to cut the number of hotel rooms being used in the immediate period ahead. The prime minister said, “My basic point of view is if you’ve come here illegally and you’re here because you fear persecution, death, torture, any of these things, in the place that you’re coming from, then I think it’s entirely reasonable to ask you to share a room in a taxpayer-funded hotel room in central London. And by doing that, we think we will free up over 10,000 places over the next few months, which will save the taxpayer hundreds of millions of pounds.”

Sunak made his statement after around 40 asylum seekers were told last week to stay in a hotel in Pimlico, London, which they refused to enter after being asked to sleep “four people per room.” The refugees mounted a protest outside the hotel, with their sleeping bags and suitcases strewn across the pavement, holding signs reading, “Help us,” and “This is a prison, not a hotel.” The government refused to resolve the crisis, with Westminster Council’s rough sleeping teams instead intervening to support the refugees.

Throwing more “red meat” to the Tory hyenas, Sunak boasted that arrests in places where migrants were employed “illegally” had doubled. He announced that measures put in place had reduced small boat crossings of the English Channel by refugees “by almost a fifth this year,” pledging, “We will not rest until the boats are stopped and with grit and determination we will stop this.”

Sunak announced that since signing an anti-immigration deal, 40 percent more small boats were being stopped by France than last year. Last year a third of crossings came from Albania, but since signing a deal with the Albanian government last December, Channel crossings by Albanians had fallen by 90 percent.

Sunak stated, “The message is if you come here illegally you can’t stay. You will be detained and removed to your own country or a safe country such as Rwanda.”

Under the Illegal Migration Bill, a duty will be placed on ministers to remove refugees “as soon as reasonably practicable” to a third country. A deal has already been signed with the Rwanda government to facilitate the mass deportation to that poverty-stricken country where desperate refugees will be forced into hovels. Last October, Home Secretary Suella Braverman made a speech to the Tory’s annual conference declaring it her “dream” and “obsession” to see asylum seekers put on deportation flights to Rwanda.

Her predecessor Priti Patel began the Rwanda deportation policy, and went as far as to organise flights. But last-minute legal challenges stopped the plane on the runway last year. The government has been involved in legal challenges and talks with the European Union ever since to modify Rule 39 of the European Court of Human Rights Rules of Court, which were the basis for the UK having to halt the flights to Rwanda.

According to a *Sun* newspaper report Tuesday, “The Home Office is secretly preparing for a controversial Rwanda deportation flight as soon as late September... Hopes are growing in Government they will win in the Court of Appeal—and avoid a Supreme Court showdown on the small Channel boats deterrent scheme.

“Ministers believe if judges throw out the appeal lodged by unions and human rights groups, it is unlikely that there will then be a legal justification for sending the case to the highest court in the land.”

The Illegal Migration Bill, dubbed by Downing Street as the “Stop the Boats” Bill passed its readings in the House of Commons where the Tories have a working majority of over 60 seats, but is now being scrutinised in the House of Lords, where the government doesn’t have an overall majority. The *Telegraph* noted that “asked twice [by the newspaper] if he is prepared to use the Parliament Act to force through the Bill should the Lords vote it down, Mr Sunak indicated willingness to do just that.”

The 1911 Parliament Act removed the power for the Lords to veto a bill proposed by the Commons. In the more than 90 years since the Act was legislated it only been used seven times.

Nothing announced by the government in its crackdown can ever be enough for the most right-wing sections of the political elite and their media echo chamber. Their ravings invariably provide the government with justifications to deepen their offensive against immigrants and asylum seekers. This was the case when Braverman engineered a rebellion by the most right-wing sections of the party in order to then proceed with toughening the already vicious Illegal Immigration Bill

Following Sunak’s visit, Tory MP for Dover Natalie Elphicke, who was at the Jet Foil listening to Sunak’s speech, said, “The prime minister specifically commented about the impact of the small boats crossings on our area, referencing my meetings with him and other Ministers to highlight pressures on local services and our community... It’s good news that overall numbers of arrivals are down 20 percent so far this year, and Albanian numbers 90 percent down. However, it’s early days and too many boats are still making the dangerous crossing and it is costing too much.”

Such is the acceptance of the media and the opposition Labour Party of the necessity to fight off what is regularly described by the Tories as “an invasion” of the UK that the only questioning Sunak faced from reporters in Dover was on where exactly the new offshore vessels would be moored. A reporter from *ITV Meridian* asked if the reduction in the number of crossings able to reach Britain was not due to government policies, but recent windy conditions in the Channel making small boat sailings more difficult.



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