

# UK government fast-tracks plans to force refugees and asylum seekers onto barges and into tents

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UK Home Secretary Suella Braverman is planning to accommodate thousands of migrants in marquees/tents at disused military sites. A source from the Home Office confirmed to *Sky News* that the tents could be housing refugees and asylum seekers in such detention camps within weeks.

According to the *Times*, the tents have been procured by the Home Office “to accommodate up to 2,000 migrants on disused military sites by the end of August as part of emergency plans to avoid the expensive process of last-minute hotel bookings.”

Border Force is predicting that the next three months will be the busiest time for migrant crossings of the English Channel. A Home Office source said, “It’s obvious we can’t again be in a position where we’re having to spot-book expensive hotels on the fly for migrants. There’s nothing wrong with this kind of temporary accommodation when needed. Other countries do use it as well.”

Among the “other countries” cited, any reference to Greece was omitted.

In September 2020, a massive fire destroyed the infamous Moria refugee detention camp on the island of Lesbos. In its place the conservative New Democracy Greek government, in alliance with the European Union, set up the temporary Kara Tepe refugee camp on a former military training area adjacent to the sea. Conditions were not only worse than in Moria, but the authorities installed barbed wire fences, exit restrictions and drones to monitor every movement.

Referring to the plan to house refugees in tents in Britain, government sources said a similar proposal was rejected when put forward under former Prime Minister Boris Johnson “because of warnings that it would trigger legal challenges based on inhumane treatment of asylum

seekers. It was even compared to concentration camps by some in government”, according to the *Times*.

The Home Office erected several temporary marquees at the Manston processing centre, a former Royal Air Force base, last autumn to deal with migrant arrivals. But lacking basic hygienic facilities they were not designed to be used for accommodation beyond a few days.

Last October, 700 refugees were evacuated to Manston following an arson attack on Western Jet Foil migrant processing centre in Dover, a direct result of the anti-migrant atmosphere whipped up by the government, the Labour opposition and the media.

Repeating the government propaganda, its media echo chamber never tires of declaring that hotel accommodation is “costing the taxpayer around £6m a day”.

The same argument is being used for the imminent deployment of the Bibby Stockholm barge, which has been likened to a floating prison, in Portland Port, Dorset. The barge is set to stay in the port for at least 18 months. Designed for 222 people, it will house up to 506 asylum seekers, whose claims are already being considered. Awaiting desperate refugees are tiny rooms, with between one and three bunk beds to increase capacity. The two bunk rooms are just 12ft by 12ft.

That the plan is to deter migrants from coming to Britain and is not simply about costs is confirmed in a report “Bibby Stockholm—At What Cost?” from the NGOs Reclaim the Seas and One Life to Live. It found that using the barge to house asylum seekers will save less than £10 a person a day.

Despite the Bibby Stockholm’s deployment meeting widespread opposition from humanitarian organisations, it left dry-dock in Falmouth and arrived at Portland Port on July 18. According to the *Financial Times*, the delay was

because “the steel hull had decayed to the point where it was dangerously thin, necessitating the replacement of entire sections.”

Reporters allowed onto the vessel highlighted serious safety concerns, including dangers of overcrowding, narrow corridors and no life-jackets. On July 31, the *Times* reported that the barge could become a potential “floating Grenfell”, referring to the Grenfell Tower fire in London in 2017 which claimed 72 lives.

Cabinet Minister Grant Shapps told reporters there was no reason why the barge “wouldn’t be absolutely safe.” Concerns expressed by the assistant general secretary of the Fire Brigades Union Andy Dark that “firefighters believe the Bibby Stockholm to be a potential death trap,” were brushed away by the government as “politically motivated.”

In a report seen by *the Independent*, a long-serving firefighter called the barge a “major life risk” and warned that most fire engines in the nearby area are “on-call” only slowing response times.

The first 50 refugees are expected to be bundled onto the Bibby Stockholm in the next few days.

Over 170 organisations—including the Refugee Council and law centres—wrote to Prime Minister Rishi Sunak in April urging him to scrap plans for asylum camps at former military bases at Scampton in Lincolnshire, Wethersfield in Essex and Catterick in North Yorkshire and the site of a former prison in East Sussex, as well as proposals to use ferries and barges.

The letter said the sites were “deeply unsuitable” and the government risks creating an “entirely preventable humanitarian catastrophe.”

The new sites have been announced following the abandonment last year of plans for a site on an ex-RAF base in Linton-on-Ouse, North Yorkshire, after a campaign by local people and refugee-supporting organisations.

“We believe people should be housed in communities, not camps,” the letter states. “Placing thousands of people in confined sites, in remote locations, will cause significant harm to people fleeing war and persecution and damage community relations.”

Responding to the government’s latest proposal, Tim Nao Hilton, chief executive of Refugee Action, said it was “staggering” that the home secretary was proceeding with the plans. “The winners from this cruel plan will be the Home Office’s asylum housing contractors, who trouser tens of millions of pounds in taxpayer-subsidised profits as standards continue to plummet.”

The Labour Party mirrors the government approach. Shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper told *Times Radio*, “The key thing here is there is existing long-standing asylum accommodation across the country that’s been in place for years ... What they need is a proper strategy to end hotel use.”

On Sunday, Labour shifted further to right with Shadow Immigration Minister Stephen Kinnock confirming to *Sky News* that Labour in office would continue to use the barges to detain asylum seekers. “The reality is, on day one of a Labour government, we have to deal with the infrastructure that we have in the complete, chaotic, shambolic mess that the Conservative government will have left us... We will be left with no choice but to deal with the mess that we inherit.”

Refugees fleeing poverty stricken and war-torn homelands—the result of decades of imperialist violence that UK forces alongside the US and NATO have inflicted—now face being herded onto crowded barges and into tents to face inhumane treatment before being deported back from where they came or to a third country.

The fast-tracking of this brutal campaign follows the Illegal Migration Bill enabling the removal of refugees to a third country becoming an Act of Parliament on July 20. The same day the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill forcing workers to continue working during a strike in “essential services” also became law.

Sunak linked the passage of both laws stating, “We are getting on with the job and today passed new laws which will play an important part in our efforts to stop the boats, support businesses to grow and allow the public to access essential services in the face of disruption.”

These developments confirm the warnings made by the *World Socialist Web Site* that barbaric, fascist assault on refugees, asylum seekers, and migrant workers by governments of every political stripe spearheads an offensive against the entire working class.



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