

Six asylum seekers drowned in Channel due to criminal actions of UK and France

Robeert Stevens
13 August 2023

The horrific sinking of a boat full of refugees and asylum seekers in the English Channel has taken at least six lives. At least 65 people were on the boat when it capsized Saturday in the middle of the Channel, a 21-mile stretch of waters between Britain and France.

The deaths are the worst loss of life in the Channel since at least 27 people died in November 2021 after an inflatable dinghy capsized in rough seas near to the French port city of Calais.

Two people are still missing said French authorities. The confirmed dead are six men from Afghanistan who were about 30 years old.

The *Financial Times* reported, “In the early hours of Saturday, a cargo ship in the Channel reported a boat in trouble off the French coast near Sangatte beach, according to a statement from the Maritime Prefecture of the Channel and the North Sea.”

It is understood that French and British coastguard vessels intervened and were able to save most of those on board the stricken vessel.

Whatever the immediate circumstances of the deaths, they occurred as the result of migrants being treated as a political hot potatoes by the British and French authorities, both committed to keeping them away from their borders by any means necessary.

According to a report published Saturday in the *Daily Mail*, “A French warship [PSP Cormoran] was escorting an overloaded small boat across the Channel to UK waters when it sank today, killing at least six migrants...” It added, “A second French vessel [Pluvier] was believed to be close by at the time of the tragedy.”

The report added that a “well-informed source” said “The boat was being escorted towards Britain by a French navy patrol vessel when it capsized”, adding, “This is a French policy designed to ensure the migrants make it to British waters as safely and quickly as possible...”

“French authorities confirmed that the Cormoran

rescued 33 survivors, while the Pluvier rescued five.”

The *Mail* is seeking to play down Britain’s role in the deaths and expresses the position of the Conservative government saying, “Furious MPs tonight [Saturday] questioned why France was not doing more to tackle the crisis, given that the UK is giving the country almost £500 million to help stop the crossings.”

Nevertheless, the sequence of the events described are highly likely. This is not the first time such an intervention has led to mass death. All evidence points to the Greek coastguard causing the deaths of hundreds of refugees aboard the fishing boat *Adriana* on June 14. Eyewitness said the decision of the coastguard to tow the stricken boat away from Greek waters caused the vessel to sink and the deaths of over 600 people.

The Channel deaths were used by the Tories and the right-wing media as fuel for an anti-immigration agenda. Crocodile tears were shed, but only to reinforce the message best articulated by the rabidly anti-migrant *Sunday Express* in a front page headline, “For Pity’s Sake Stop the Boats”.

The main slogan of the Rishi Sunak government as it cultivates a fascistic constituency is “Stop the Boats”. The media cheered the Tories as they passed the draconian Illegal Migration Bill only last month, depriving migrants who cross the Channel, deemed to have arrived illegally, of the right to asylum.

The Channel deaths also served to overshadow the brutal events around the arrival of the first asylum seekers onboard new prison ship, the *Bibby Stockholm* barge. On Monday, the first 15 migrants were forced aboard the *Bibby Stockholm*, berthed in at Portland Port, Dorset. This is the first such ship deployed by the government to detain migrants as part of the policy to remove 50,000 asylum seekers from hotels—accompanied by screaming headlines claiming migrants are living in luxury hotels at a cost of £6 million a day to the taxpayer.

The asylum seekers were bundled onboard despite warnings from the Fire Brigades Union that the vessel was dangerous. Twenty refused after taking legal advice, as the Home Office didn't even carry out suitability screening of people deeply traumatised by past experiences including seeing people drown.

On Friday, the Bibby Stockholm was evacuated due to Legionella in the onboard water system. It transpired that the Home Office knew that Legionella had been detected on the vessel on Monday, as the first asylum seekers went aboard. The pro-government *Telegraph*, reported Saturday, "A spokesman from the campaign group Stand Up To Racism, who is in contact with the asylum seekers, said three of them claim to have flu-like symptoms consistent with a Legionella infection. It is understood that they have been tested but are still waiting for their results."

The FBU commented, "This outbreak of Legionella suggests that it's only a matter of time before either lives are lost or there is serious harm to a detainee."

Virtually no-one sent onto a dangerous and disease-ridden boat had entered Britain illegally based on the government's criteria. The *Independent* reported, "After speaking to charities and legal firms working with more than 30 asylum seekers ordered to move onto the barge by the Home Office, *The Independent* has been told of only two who arrived by small boat. All others used regular passenger planes to reach the UK, with some claiming asylum at the airport shortly after landing—meaning they did not enter the country illegally."

None of this will have the slightest impact on a government determined to ram through its brutal agenda. Mass evictions from hotels are underway, including 40 asylum seekers being forced out of a hotel in Scarborough by August 16. Around 50 have already been booted out. North Yorkshire Council has had to make homelessness referrals for some families in the hotel. The BBC reported that 400 Afghan asylum seekers are being evicted from hotels in Essex.

Last week the government threatened that anyone refusing to get aboard barges or any other proposed alternative to hotels, faces being made homeless and will have to fend for themselves.

On Sunday, the *Telegraph* reported that the government "will hire more barges to house asylum seekers and host up to 5,000 migrants in office and student accommodation blocks." The "10 unused student accommodation and former office block sites" being lined up have a "capacity averaging at about 500 places per site."

Ministry of Defence sites are also being utilised, "with officials heartened by the fact that legal bids have so far not prevented migrants being moved onto former military sites like Wethersfield, in Essex. The *Telegraph* understands that another base, RAF Scampton in Lincolnshire, will begin receiving migrants from next month."

The policy of shoving asylum seekers into appalling conditions is all about warning any other asylum seekers that this is what you will face if they make it to the UK's shores. Speaking to the *Telegraph*, South Thanet Conservative MP Craig Mackinlay said, "This type of accommodation, whether it's office blocks, ex-student accommodation or floating barges, can't do any harm as a deterrent effect. Being put in a barge is not going to be as attractive as a three- or four-star hotel in Pimlico."

The Tories are moving ahead—despite legal challenges—with their fascistic policy to deport asylum seekers, as soon as they arrive in Britain, thousands of miles away to Rwanda or another "third country". Countries being designated "safe" include Niger, just taken over by military leaders in a coup and the latest flashpoint in the struggle by the imperialist powers for a redivision of the world.

Conservative MP Marco Longhi said, "The tragic loss of life in the Channel was only a matter of time—and it will happen again and again until we deter people from trying to cross. Unless we can state, and execute, a policy that says 'come to the UK illegally and you will be removed to Rwanda or elsewhere'—we shall continue failing not just the British people but those crossing the Channel too."

The full force of the state is being brought down on a few thousand people fleeing their poverty stricken and war-torn homelands, destroyed by decades of imperialist war and Western power intrigues. Only around 15,800 people have made the Channel crossing this year, according to the government, a fall of around 15 percent on the same period last year.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact