

Bibby Stockholm suicide due to UK's brutal treatment of asylum seekers

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The confirmed suicide on Tuesday of an asylum seeker on the Bibby Stockholm barge moored at Portland Port, Dorset, is due to the criminal and inhumane treatment of refugees by the Sunak government.

The vessel to hold asylum seekers was deployed in August and serves as a floating prison.

An initial police statement reported the “sudden death of a resident of the Bibby Stockholm” at 6.22am, Tuesday December 12. Asylum seekers on the Bibby Stockholm came forward within 24 hours to speak to the media under anonymity to report the man had taken his own life. Richard Drax, Conservative MP for South Dorset, then confirmed it was death by suicide.

The identity of the asylum seeker and other vital information has yet to emerge.

The media repeats ad nauseum official government terms describing refugees as “residents” who are “housed” on the vessel. This Orwellian language is used to conceal the fact that the asylum seekers were rounded up and are kept in a hell hole.

Steve Smith, CEO of refugee charity Care4Calais explained, “The UK Government must take responsibility for this human tragedy.

“They have wilfully ignored the trauma they are inflicting on people who are sent to the Bibby Stockholm, and the hundreds being accommodated in former military barracks.”

He added, “We have regularly been reporting suicidal intentions among residents and no action is taken.”

The Bibby Stockholm was leased for 18 months by former Home Secretary Suella Braverman and has been used to hold refugees since early August while their applications for asylum are processed. This was always conceived of as a punitive measure by a sociopathic home secretary who personifies the far-right lurch of the entire Conservative government.

The government has dismissed all objections that the

three-storey vessel was oppressive and dangerous. The standard reply was that if it was “good enough for oil and gas workers” it was good enough for asylum seekers.

However, its use as temporary accommodation for offshore workers was based on a single occupancy of the 222 cabins. The cabins, designed to accommodate one person and measuring around 12 ft by 12 ft, had bunk beds installed for asylum seekers, with some communal rooms converted into dormitories for four to six men. The Home Office announced from the start it intended to more than double its capacity to 506.

The suicide this week took place with around 300 asylum seekers crammed on board.

The Bibby Stockholm had to be evacuated, with the first 39 asylum seekers on board, within days of it being opened on August 7. It was closed for two months from August 11 until October 19 after a strain of the potentially lethal legionella bacteria was found in the water supply. It later transpired that this discovery was made even as asylum seekers were originally herded onto the vessel.

On top of highly confined and insanitary living conditions, concerns expressed by the Fire Brigades Union that the Bibby Stockholm was a “potential death trap” due to overcrowding and lack of fire exits were brushed aside as “politically motivated.”

Bibby Stockholm has served as a Trojan horse for an expanded network of detention camps to hold refugees. It is surrounded by a perimeter fence complete with barbed wire, with security guards on board 24/7. Asylum seekers must carry ID cards and are put through intrusive airport style security scans to get on and off, even to have a cigarette.

More than 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 protests and warnings have not only been dismissed but those raising them have been vilified.

The *Daily Mail* now running comments by those on board the Bibby Stockholm about the appalling conditions complained of “Leftie Lawyers” blocking the transfer of refugees onto the floating prison, citing Braverman’s denunciations of “crooked immigrations lawyers” who help “illegal immigrants, game the system.”

As the WSWS explained, “The first asylum seekers were sent onboard in a filthy political atmosphere, akin to Nazi Germany, with TV news outlets hosting live coverage from the port and right-wing news media denouncing migrants.”

The offensive was led by the Deputy Chairman of the Conservative Party Lee Anderson, who told the rabidly anti-immigrant *Daily Express*, “If they [asylum seekers] don’t like barges then they should f**k off back to France”.

Anderson’s rant referred to refugees who have made the Channel crossing on dinghies and small boats, a desperate journey which claimed almost 300 lives from 1999 to 2020. Many more have since died including the 27 who perished in the worst ever loss of life in the Channel in November 2021. This grim tally was added to just days after the Bibby Stockholm suicide with the death of a woman Friday morning aboard a ship of 66 migrants which partially deflated in the Channel five miles off the French coast.

Anderson’s comments were only the most inflammatory expression of a policy designed to brutalise refugees and make their life insufferable as a deterrent against those seeking asylum in the UK.

This was wholly supported by the Labour Party. Shadow Immigration Minister Stephen Kinnock told *Sky News* in August, as refugees were rounded up onto the Bibby Stockholm, that an incoming Labour government would have “no choice” but to continue to use barges and ex-military bases to detain asylum seekers.

This is the reality behind Tory Home Secretary James Cleverly stating in Parliament on Tuesday, “Tragically, there has been a death on the Bibby Stockholm barge. I’m sure that the thoughts of the whole House, like mine, are with those affected.”

The crocodile tears were shed just prior to the reading

and passing of second stage of the Rwanda deportation Bill, which saw the party’s extreme right-wing set the agenda. The so-called “Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill is a further evisceration of the right to asylum, flouting the Supreme Court which ruled deportation to the unsafe African country 6,000 miles away was in violation of domestic and international law.

Labour’s opposition to the Bill was framed as outflanking the Tories from the right, based on decrying their plans as ineffective and expensive. Speaking to the *Sun*, party leader Sir Keir Starmer set out Labour’s own plans to abrogate the right to asylum based on third country offshoring: “There are various schemes, as you know, around the world where individuals are processed, usually en route to their country of destination, elsewhere.”

In contrast to the degraded political contest between the Tories and Labour over which is the most anti-migrant, flowers and messages have been left at the gates of the port by local residents in Portland in memory of the asylum seeker who took his life on the Bibby Stockholm.

Arts organiser Holly-Nambi told the *Guardian*, “Over the last few months there have been moments of hope with the community coming together to welcome these guys... English classes, boxing and fitness sessions, community walks, music events. Friendships have been made. There’s been a beauty in it. But now we have this.”

Retired teacher Simon Pugh-Jones told ITVX, “It’s a simple thing about caring for people in Britain, we do care about people but we have a government that goes out of its way not to care about people.”



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