

# Five migrants die in desperate attempt to cross English Channel

Harvey Thompson  
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Five migrants died attempting to cross its near freezing waters of the English Channel in the early hours of Sunday morning. According to local authorities, four of the dead were from Iraq and Syria.

French maritime officials said that 72 people—including 10 children—tried to get into a small boat which capsized while attempting to set off towards the UK from the beach at Wimereux, Pas-de-Calais. They were trying to reach a larger boat when tragedy struck.

The incident happened around 1.45am local time. The Maritime Prefect of the Pas-de-Calais region, Jacques Billant told *Agence France-Presse* that another person rescued from the sea remained in critical condition in a Boulogne hospital. Another was treated at the scene for severe hypothermia.

Four people initially died and a fifth was confirmed dead after being located at the edge of Wimereux beach Sunday at around 8.45am local time. According to reports the person could not be resuscitated.

Many more could have died in the incident were it not for the efforts of a rescue mission involving around 50 firefighters, several police vehicles and a French Navy helicopter. Dozens of survivors were taken to a local community centre, according to regional newspaper *La Voix du Nord*.

More deaths could have happened over the weekend, as French authorities were involved in no less than four separate rescue operations. The *Guardian* reported a prefecture statement noting, “In all, 182 people were rescued offshore by French resources during the night of 13 January to 14 January 2024 and during the day on 14 January.”

The coastline around the port of Calais is the shortest crossing point to England. Over two decades after the closure of a Red Cross centre in Sangatte, hundreds of migrants are still living in tents and makeshift shelters near Calais and Dunkirk in the hope of making the

dangerous crossing to the UK coast—either hidden in a truck or aboard a small boat or dinghy. Well over 300 asylum seekers have died attempting the Channel crossing since 1999.

Europe correspondent for *Sky News*, Adam Parsons, visited the stretch of coast where the incident took place, and said, “This tragedy happened not very far at all from the French coast. This isn’t one that happened miles out to sea. Our understanding is that this boat got into difficulty in relatively shallow waters and that people jumped off trying to get back to shore, and then landed in that freezing water.

“The water temperature is about nine degrees Celsius, people may have had their possessions, wearing clothing, going in there and getting weighed down, I don’t think it would take very long before hypothermia would set in.”

Maritime Prefect Billant concurred: “The water temperature is 7C. In the event of sinking, the lifespan is limited to 10 minutes.”

Many of the countries from which migrant workers are seeking to escape to Europe, such as Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and Libya, have been broken apart by decades of war, occupation and social turmoil, due to decades of US imperialist violence which London has been involved in up to its neck.

As the incident occurred in French waters, UK Coastguard had no involvement, nor did it offer any comment. The latest deaths are the first recorded for 2024. A boat crossing the previous day is believed to have broken a near four-week period during which no crossings to Britain were recorded due to adverse weather conditions.

The issue of the small boat crossings is being intensively utilized by the Conservative government of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, with the assistance of the Labour Party of Sir Keir Starmer to further push parliamentary politics onto the far right territory of

criminalizing the right to asylum, tightening borders and scapegoating and persecuting migrant workers already in the UK as the thin end of the wedge of an assault on the social conditions of the working class as a whole.

Freedom of Information (FoI) data obtained last year revealed that during a period of just four days in early November 2021, UK authorities abandoned to their fate the passengers of 19 small boats in danger in the English Channel. These were carrying a combined total of 440 migrants. This was in the same month that the largest single loss of life in the English Channel was recorded, when 27 migrants drowned in rough seas as their inflatable dinghy capsized.

Speaking to the *BBC's Laura Kuenssberg on Sunday*, former Conservative prime minister David Cameron, now foreign secretary in the Sunak government, put on his best furrowed brow expression declaring, “You can only think about what an appalling end it would be, and the cold waters of the Channel in the middle of the night. It breaks my heart to hear about it.” He claimed the British government had done “a huge amount” to support French authorities with policing and intelligence operations.

The crocodile tears of Lord Cameron, Sunak, et al., does not deflect one iota from the fact that they all have the blood of migrants on their hands.

In 2012, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition headed by Cameron unveiled a set of administrative and legislative measure as part of the Home Office’s “hostile environment” policy, specifically aimed at making life as difficult as possible for anyone without a legal leave to remain to force them to leave the country. The policy was denounced by the United Nations Human Rights Council as fostering xenophobia.

The dozen years since have witnessed an unprecedented lurch to the right on immigration in the UK and across Europe, with the ruling elite now adopting policies previously associated with fascist movements.

Cameron said that the only answer to the latest deaths was more repression, as he pressed for the passing of his government’s Rwanda Deportation Bill as “essential” to deter small boats crossing the Channel. The aim of the Bill is to allow immediate deportation to Rwanda of migrant arrivals to the UK coast in small boats. Sunak is attempting to revive the Bill after it was ruled unlawful by the Supreme Court in November.

In December the modified Bill passed its second reading by 313 votes to 269. Its text declares Rwanda a “safe country”, removes the duty of public authorities not to act in a way which is incompatible with the European

Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), and of the UK courts to “take account of” relevant cases of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), and allows ministers to ignore temporary injunctions issued by the ECtHR.

This brutal Bill as it stands does not satisfy the fascistic wing of the Tory Party—numbering dozens of MPs—who are seeking with a series of amendments in votes on Tuesday and Wednesday to ensure it is even more repressive.

The British government claims to have prevented 26,000 attempted crossings, through its partnership with France. For their part, adhering to “Fortress Europe” as firmly as their British counterparts, French border authorities took exception to the harmonious depiction of Anglo-French co-operation. In a statement, the French Court of Accounts, which audits spending, said, “Despite the joint declaration of French and British interior ministers on 14 November 2022, who were committed to improving the work of dismantling the criminal gangs and their resources, the British are not communicating exploitable intelligence on the departures of the small boats, or are giving ‘first level’ information, which is very general and not cross-referenced.”

The Labour Party offers no alternative. Also speaking to Kuenssberg, Starmer reiterated Labour’s reactionary agenda saying the latest drownings were a “tragic loss of life” but, “I absolutely agree we need to stop these Channel crossings”.

Labour’s opposition to Rwanda is, in Starmer’s words, because it is a “gimmick” that has cost hundreds of millions of pounds without deporting a single asylum seeker. Labour would instead “go after the criminal gangs that are running this vile trade [of boat crossings]” and carry out even harsher prosecutions of its victims. Last September *Sky News* host Trevor Phillips asked Starmer if he was prepared to use a section 38b order under the Terrorism Act 2000—which requires people, including families, to report suspects involved in terrorism to the police—against the families of children aboard small Channel crossing boats. Starmer replied, “What I have said is that we need to put them in the bracket of terrorists. That’s how we smash those gangs behind the boats.”



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