Rescue of 173 migrants narrowly averts mass Channel deaths, as Burnham pledges “relentless” efforts to “stop the boats”

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On Tuesday, up to 173 people escaped with their lives in the Channel between Britain and France, after a dinghy with migrants on board capsized after setting sail on route to England’s south coast.

The boat capsized in the French search and rescue region after its engine caught fire forcing a rescue mission from UK border security and French vessels. Also involved in the rescue was a Royal National Lifeboat Institution ship which launched 6 a.m. All on board were rescued and were take back to Boulogne in France, but 11 were reported as having minor injuries. The BBC reported, “two French boats rescued 105 migrants and the British boats rescued 63.”

The boat left France on Monday evening. Prior to the engine setting on fire, five of those onboard were rescued, and also taken back to France, following what the *Guardian* reported as an “earlier incident”. According to the French maritime prefecture, “the remaining people on board refused the assistance offered by the French patrol boats”.

A mass loss of life was narrowly averted less than a week after the tightening of border controls by Britain and France claimed four more lives in the Channel.

Three women and a man, as yet unidentified, died attempting the crossing on July 29 and 30. The tragedies took place hours after 752 people reached Britain in nine boats, taking advantage of calmer weather conditions—the highest daily total recorded so far in 2026.

The man died when the boat he was travelling on—that had already picked up passengers from the water—capsized off Hardelot, south of Boulogne-sur-Mer, late on July 29. He is believed to have been in his 30s or 40s. Six others, including a one-year-old child, were injured; one man, with burns to half his body, was airlifted to hospital by naval helicopter.

The vessel had travelled up the coast from Berck, some 13 miles south, via Sainte-Cécile, before it capsized as more people tried to board off Hardelot. According to reports, in the anodyne language of border control, French security officials “neutralised” the boat. By law, border security officers are allowed to puncture boats before launch, but not once they are at sea. A judicial inquiry has been opened into the death.

Seven hours later, three women, reported to be aged about 20, 30 and 50, were found dead aboard a boat near Plage du Braek, close to Dunkirk. The *Guardian* reported, based on evidence, including video, compiled by charity Utopia 56, that French riot police fired teargas shortly before 4 a.m. at around 80 people, including families, who were trying to reach the beach and board the same boat in which the women’s bodies were discovered two hours later.

Utopia 56 said its staff recovered at least 35 spent canisters. They could not establish whether the women were already aboard the boat or among those it saw being teargassed as they tried to reach it. The boat itself was brought ashore; resuscitation attempts failed and all three were declared dead.

The riot officers belong to the Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité (CRS) unit, widely hated in France due to their brutal attacks. As part of the £662 million Channel border deal agreed by Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood with France in April, 50 CRS officers, “specially trained in the use of riot and crowd control tactics,” have been deployed to French beaches. The deal also involved deploying millions of pounds worth of drones, two helicopters and a camera system to intercept smugglers and migrants.

Some 62 people have died in the English Channel between 2018 and 2025, according to the University of Oxford’s Migration Observatory, with a further 17 deaths recorded so far in 2026, including the latest four.

Deaths in the Channel are foreseeable and preventable, and the mounting toll can be understood only as the intended outcome of the ruthless crackdown against refugees by the European Union and Britain, with the governments in London and Paris playing a central role.

A spokesperson for Andy Burnham’s UK Labour government wept their usual crocodile tears: “Every death in

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the Channel is a tragedy and a stark reminder of the dangers posed by criminal gangs exploiting vulnerable people for profit."

The same script is read from after each Channel tragedy, with the deaths quickly used as ghoulish bargaining chips in Franco-British negotiations, as more resources are demanded for policing migration.

The militarised border infrastructure on both sides of the Channel has not stopped crossings; it has made them deadlier. Desperate migrants are being forced towards ever more remote launch sites and onto ever more overcrowded and unseaworthy vessels.

Figures compiled by the Centre for Sociodigital Futures at the University of Bristol and the Swiss research agency Border Forensics, published in March in a report titled *How 'stopping the boats' kills*, show that deaths rose steeply after a previous major UK-France deal designed to "stop the boats". Seventeen people died or went missing in six fatal incidents in the final four months of 2023, shortly after then Conservative Prime Minister Rishi Sunak agreed a £460 million deal with President Emmanuel Macron.

In 2024, 83 people were recorded dead or missing in 22 incidents, the deadliest year thus far. Another 29 died or went missing in 20 fatal incidents in 2025. Between 2019 and 2023 there were 68 dead or missing in 21 fatal incidents; between August 2023 and January 2026 the toll reached 129 in 48 incidents—even as the number of boats and people crossing fell. In 2022, the record year in which more than 45,000 people crossed, seven were reported dead or missing.

Charities working in northern France have noted a brutal shift, with the French gendarmerie acting more aggressively to justify the UK payments, which the anti-migrant right-wing media in the UK constantly insist is withdrawn if crossings are not prevented. Smugglers have resorted to more dangerous tactics to avoid the growing number of police, taking on board people already in the water and launching from quieter, more remote jetties. The deaths since 2023, including those on July 29, occurred close to French shores, often barely away from the beach.

Speaking with the white cliffs of Dover as his backdrop on August 2, after the horrifying events at Ceuta, where at least 99 migrants died trying to reach Spain from Africa, Prime Minister Burnham said his government would be "relentless" in curbing the number of people arriving on small boats. Burnham did not mention the four deaths of days earlier, and neither did the press ask him about them.

At the time, Mahmood's Home Office announced that the number of National Crime Agency officers tackling smuggling gangs had risen to almost 800, from 376 at the start of 2025, with Burnham claiming a similar doubling of French officers. The Home Office trumpeted that almost 300 arrests of smuggling gang members were made last year, with more than 1,100 small boats and engines seized since July 2024, claiming that if the equipment had been used it could have helped 72,000 more people come illegally to the UK. The Home Office made no calculation of how many would have drowned in the Channel.

Burnham is pledged to intensify the already a cruel persecution of asylum seekers and migrants. His predecessor Keir Starmer deliberately aped both Enoch Powell and Margaret Thatcher when declaring that without strict border controls "we risk becoming an island of strangers."

Starmer's government, under Home Secretaries Yvette Cooper and Mahmood, suspended family reunion rights for refugees, established a Border Security Command modelled on counter-terrorism operations, reopened detention camps previously condemned for human rights abuses, and pursued deportations at a rate exceeding the previous Tory administrations.

The fascistic mobilisations outside asylum hotels, which saw pogrom-like attacks in the summer of 2024, were the result of the demonisation of asylum seekers under successive governments.

The Socialist Equality Party does not call for "safe and legal routes" within a fundamentally unchanged militarised border regime. That accepts the premise of the ruling elite that only certain people have the right to enter and live in the UK, while the refugees created by the wars of European imperialism do not. Our demand is the universal recognition of the right to asylum: for those fleeing persecution, war or destitution to cross any border and receive protection.

In our Statement of Aims we demand, "Defend Immigrants! Oppose Nationalism and Racism! For the international unity of the working class!"

The statement reads: "The vicious scapegoating of immigrants and refugees for the social crisis caused by capitalism is the stock in trade of all capitalist parties, from Labour to Reform UK. The entire framework of 'border controls' and anti-immigrant legislation must be abolished. Full democratic and citizenship rights must be granted to all immigrants, including those classified as 'illegal'. Against the noxious fumes of racism and nationalism, the working class must unite globally in the fight for socialism."

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