

UK Labour government sets asylum seeker deportations record

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The anti-immigration offensive of Britain's Labour government has seen a record number of deportations of asylum seekers since it came to power in July.

Home Office data reveals that 9,400 people have been deported to their home countries since then. The *Daily Mirror* reported last week, "Altogether, more than 25 bespoke returns flights have taken place since July 5th, returning individuals to a range of countries including Albania, Poland, Romania and Vietnam, plus the first ever charter to Timor-Leste, and the biggest ever returns flight to Nigeria and Ghana."

Including the mass deportations to Nigeria and Ghana, the Labour government has organised what the right-wing press are hailing as the "three biggest returns flights in UK history." A significant proportion of these are "forced deportations"—almost 2,600, an increase of 19 percent compared to 2023 when the Conservatives were in office.

Labour campaigned for election pledged to deport thousands more asylum seekers. Taking office it immediately scrapped the Conservatives' Rwanda policy, denouncing the Tories for spending hundreds of millions of pounds on failed attempts to deport asylum seekers to the African country. No flights to Rwanda were able to leave Britain due to legal challenges against a policy flouting international law.

Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer declared the Rwanda policy "dead and buried", with Labour shifting all existing funds allocated to it over to its new beefed-up Border Security Command (BSC) and Returns and Enforcement Unit.

Three weeks after Labour took power, on July 25, the Home Office announced that 46 migrants had been deported by plane to Timor-Leste and Vietnam. The flight to Vietnam was the first for deportations since 2022. Home Secretary Yvette Cooper crowed, "We have immediately replaced the flight planning for Rwanda with actual flights to return people who have no right to stay to their home countries instead."

In August, Cooper promised to deport at least 14,385

"illegal migrants" by the end of the year, the highest rate since 2018. The government continually briefs the media on its anti-immigrant agenda to ensure front-page coverage and in the words of the *Mirror*, "it's understood more flights are planned before the end of the year—to new countries the UK hasn't previously chartered flights to," meaning Labour may well exceed its target.

Throughout the summer, the media have kept up a morbid running commentary on how many asylum seekers have been successfully kicked out of the country by Labour, documenting any "progress" made while keeping a score on how many asylum seekers are still arriving by boat. By August 31, the *Daily Mail*, a frothing anti-immigrant hate sheet, was splashing a headline lauding "The biggest deportation flight in history and how Labour have drawn first blood in battle against the small boat crossings". This was a reference to asylum seekers whose only means to enter the UK is via the hazardous crossing of the Channel.

The article by right-winger Dan Hodges, who describes himself as a "tribal neo-Blairite", is a paean to Cooper. Hodges backed her for the Labour leadership in the 2015 election in which she and another Blairite, Liz Kendall—now Starmer's Work and Pensions minister—were routed by Jeremy Corbyn.

Hodges was crestfallen that boats were still able to make it to the UK's shores: "Our new Prime Minister hit the dubious milestone of 6,000 new arrivals on August 27, the 54th day of his premiership". But this was a Labour success as the Tories' "Liz Truss reached it after just 29 days, Rishi Sunak after 38."

Starmer was keeping asylum seekers out, enthused Hodges, because since the election "the rate of new arrivals has actually fallen—it is currently 25 percent lower than the 25,000 who had arrived by this stage in 2022. And that's despite the warm weather and calm seas of the past month."

This was down to the "decision to redeploy... huge resources" away from the Rwanda policy. Hodges cited a Home Office official who said, "One of Yvette's first acts was to move 300 officials off Rwanda, and on to ordinary

deportations”.

Hodges pointed to the “immediate results. Although it was done with little fanfare, on August 23 a flight left the UK with 220 illegal migrants on board. Though ministers won’t reveal the destination for reasons of diplomatic protocol, it represented the biggest single-day deportation in British history, and was processed without the last-minute lawyerly wrangling and recrimination associated with previous removal efforts.”

Hodges noted the close relationship between Cooper and Director General of Immigration Enforcement, Bas Javid—brother of the former Tory Home Secretary Sajid Javid. This has centred on deporting migrants from countries with “low grant rates”, as “there is virtually no chance of an asylum request being approved and options for a successful legal challenge are much more limited.” To fill deportation planes the government was “prioritising raids” on “car-washes, nail bars and some specific areas of the hospitality sector”.

Labour is doing everything to escalate its deportation regime, with Starmer telling reporters of the 9,400 already deported, “We have had the biggest single plane loads of returns going off, I think we have had the three biggest now that have ever gone off, so that is really good on returns.”

Starmer said he was working closely with the French, German and Italian governments—who have created a Fortress Europe with barbed wire fences sealing off the continent to asylum seekers, backed by vicious “pushback” operations, to ensure that known migrant routes are cut-off—and was “pressing hard” on law enforcement.

Italy’s government is led by the fascist Giorgia Meloni with whom Starmer has sought the closest relations since taking office, holding extensive talks at what he described as a “fantastic meeting” in Rome in September, and at leaders’ summits. The November 17 *Sunday Times* noted that the “pair discussed how her right-wing government had succeeded in reducing the number of migrants reaching Italy’s shores by boat, with the interior ministry reporting a 62 percent fall in arrivals over the first seven months of 2024. Frontex, the EU’s border force, has calculated a 64 per cent fall in the number of people arriving from north Africa and Malta.”

Flaunting his relations with Meloni, Starmer spoke on November 4 to the General Assembly of INTERPOL—the intergovernmental organization that co-ordinates police forces around the world.

Labour’s anti-immigration agenda is shrouded in Starmer’s oft-made statement about the need to “smash the gangs” who organise the boats making the Channel crossings. He declared, “People-smuggling should be viewed as a global security threat similar to terrorism.

We’ve got to combine resources, share intelligence and tactics, and tackle the problem upstream, working together to shut down the smuggling routes.” As “illegal migration is, without question, a massive driver of global insecurity,” the prime minister declared, “I will work with anyone serious who can offer solutions on this—anyone.”

“Anyone” refers to the growing number of far-right governments in Europe, specifically Meloni’s of whom Starmer said, “We’re also working with Italy to dismantle the supply chains of maritime equipment, combat illicit financial flows, and strengthen our investigative capacities and our data sharing. And as part of the UK’s wider reset with the European Union, we are seeking a new security pact, including restoring access to real-time intelligence sharing networks.”

In the two weeks since, Starmer has centred praise on Italy’s “upstream work” in north Africa, in Tunisia and Libya, with which Rome has signed deals that intensify border security and train up the coastguard to prevent migrants escaping.

The *Sunday Times* reported that Cooper is working on a “series of Italy-style deals with several countries to help them stop thousands of illegal migrants setting off on the perilous journey to Britain. Named in the report were Kurdistan, Iraq, Turkey and Vietnam, with “‘co-operation and security’ agreements expected to be concluded before the end of the year.”

Labour have no differences with the Tories on “offshoring” asylum processing. It pulled the plug on the Rwanda scheme only because it was “unworkable”. Last month, Labour announced it had reached an agreement to deport any migrants arriving in the Chagos Islands in the British Indian Ocean territories to St Helena, an island in the South Atlantic 5,000 miles from the UK.

Hodges’ *Mail* piece cites a Downing Street source who said, “We’re not going back to the Rwanda scheme... It was a costly shambles. But we might have to look at some sort of offshore processing model to send a firm signal.”

The model is provided by Meloni, with Starmer “very interested” in Italy’s new five-year asylum seeker deal with Albania. The terms stipulate that the Balkan country hold 3,000 asylum seekers picked up by the Italian coastguard at any one time—roughly 36,000 across a year—in two camps while their claims are processed.



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