



Home Office

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Holly Mumby-Croft MP
House of Commons
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CTS Reference: M18846/00

29 September 2020

Dear Holly,

Thank you for your email correspondence of 21 August 2020 to the Home Secretary on behalf of a number of your constituents, regarding small boats attempting to cross the Channel carrying migrants to the UK. I am replying as the Minister for Immigration Compliance and the Courts. I am sorry for the delay in replying.

The Home Secretary and I are deeply angered that people are entering the country in this dangerous way, often facilitated by ruthless criminals. We are doing everything we can across Government to bring these crossings to a halt and make the route unviable.

Illegal migration is not a new phenomenon. Every Government over the last 20 years and more have experienced migrants – often economic migrants – attempting to reach the UK through illegal means. The majority of these crossings are facilitated by ruthless criminal gangs that make money from exploiting migrants who are determined to come here. It is an offence to assist unlawful immigration to the UK and to profit from helping an individual arrive in the UK in order to claim asylum. Those who make the crossing are not only breaking the UK's immigration rules by entering without permission, they are also fuelling the criminal people traffickers who prey on the vulnerable.

We are working with the National Crime Agency to go after those who profit from such misery. Already this year, we have arrested 179 individuals, resulting in 24 convictions related to people smuggling. With a further 296 disruptions against organised crime gangs and individuals who were engaged in organised immigration crime, 124 of which related to people smuggling. We currently have 176 live investigations into general maritime activity.

In August 2020, the Home Secretary announced the appointment of former Royal Marine Dan O'Mahoney as Clandestine Channel Threat Commander. His objective is to make Channel crossings unviable and prevent other forms of high-risk clandestine entry into the UK (such as hiding in the back of lorries). He is working closely with the French to build on the joint work already under way, urgently exploring tougher action including stronger enforcement measures and adopting interceptions at sea and the direct return of boats. This appointment is indicative of our joint commitment to seizing control of this issue and driving forward efforts to completely eradicate these dangerous and unacceptable crossings.

These criminally facilitated journeys are not just dangerous, they are unnecessary. France, from where these boats are launched, and other EU countries through which these migrants have travelled, are manifestly safe countries with fully functioning asylum and immigration systems. Genuine refugees seeking safety should claim asylum in the first safe country they reach – that is the fastest route to safety. There is no excuse to refuse to do so and instead travel illegally and dangerously to the UK, and in doing so asylum applicants call into question the sincerity of their claims for international protection. Those fleeing persecution in this way have many opportunities to claim asylum in the European countries they have passed through long before attempting this illegal and unnecessary crossing. The Home Secretary and I are determined to end this farcical and dangerous situation of people in small boats risking life and limb to come to the UK from safe countries.

We are already working with our French colleagues to prevent these crossings. This includes patrols of the beaches by French officers (the UK is funding Gendarme Reservists), surveillance and intelligence sharing supported by airborne surveillance assets such as drones and planes which seek to identify migrants preparing to cross so that they can be intercepted before they do. The Government has provided the French with extensive resources and funding and we continue to work in a constructive way to tackle this issue upstream. We are also discussing the deployment of more UK funded police officers along the French coasts. In July we also established a joint intelligence cell to ensure that intelligence about attempted crossings is rapidly acted upon, and continual interceptions on French soil are evidence of the success of that approach. Over 3,000 crossing attempts were stopped this year alone by the French authorities, and around 50% of all crossing attempts are stopped on or near French beaches.

However, we know we need to do more, and it serves both French and UK interests to work together to cut this route entirely.

It is essential to return people who make the crossings where we can. Despite the increasing frequency of individuals submitting last-minute appeals that we would have expected to have been made far earlier in proceedings, and which often transpire to be unmeritorious, the Home Secretary is increasing removals and the number of returns associated with small boat crossings. Since August 12, we have successfully removed and returned 58 of these individuals to France, Germany, Spain and Netherlands. We are also currently working to return over 1,000 cases where migrants have previously claimed asylum in European countries and, under the current EU Dublin regulations, should be legally returned there. We are planning further (weekly) returns of small boat migrants to countries where they previously claimed asylum such as France, Germany, Italy and Spain, where we returned 11 individuals on 3 September. We have multiple further returns flights planned in the coming weeks.

However, the Government's efforts are often hampered by often vexatious and ultimately unmeritorious legal challenges which can prevent or defer removal action at the very last minute (in some cases on the steps of a plane prior to removal), irrespective of the merits or substance of the legal challenge being made.

There is therefore considerable policy work underway to address where the UK's immigration and asylum system is being exploited and abused, and we are developing legislation to address the legal loopholes that are generating unmeritorious immigration and asylum claims so that we can more quickly remove those who come here illegally and who do not merit genuine protection needs. Leaving the EU asylum system on 31 December will present a number of opportunities for radical reform. We are also exploring whether tactics on the water to physically prevent the entry of unauthorised migrants' boats to UK territorial waters are viable.

We completely understand and share the enormous anger people feel at these crossings. We will take every step necessary – practical and legislative – to stop the crossings, control our borders, and return those who enter our country illegally.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C. Philp', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Chris Philp MP
Minister for Immigration Compliance and the Courts