

PM speech on action to tackle illegal migration: 14 April 2022

For centuries, our United Kingdom has had a proud history of welcoming people from overseas, including many fleeing persecution.

My own great-grandfather came from Turkey in fear of his life, because our country offered sanctuary for his outspoken journalism.

And when you look back over the centuries as people have come seeking refuge or simply in search of somewhere to build a better life, you see this is the very stuff our history is made of.

From the French Huguenots, to the Jewish refugees from Tsarist Russia, to the docking of the Empire Windrush, to the South Asians fleeing East Africa, to the many, many others who have come from different countries at different times for different reasons, all have wanted to be here because our United Kingdom is a beacon of openness and generosity, and all in turn have contributed magnificently to the amazing story of the UK.

Today that proud history of safe and legal migration is ultimately responsible for many of those working in our hospitals and on the front line of our response to the pandemic, for more than 60 per cent of the England football team at the final of Euro 2020, for many of our country's leading figures in the worlds of business, art and culture, and, I'm pleased to say, for ever growing numbers of people serving in public life, including colleagues of mine like Nadhim Zahawi who escaped with his family from Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Dominic Raab, whose Jewish father came to Britain from Czechoslovakia to escape Nazi Germany, and Priti Patel, whose family fled persecution in Uganda.

So I'm proud that this government has continued the great British tradition of providing sanctuary to those in need, in fact, doing more to resettle vulnerable people in the UK – through safe and legal routes – than any other government in recent history.

Since 2015 we have offered a place to over 185,000 men, women and children seeking refuge, more than the entire population of Sunderland and more than any other similar resettlement schemes in Europe.

This includes almost 100,000 British Nationals Overseas threatened by draconian security laws in Hong Kong, 20,000 through our Syrian scheme, 13,000 from Afghanistan and to whom we owe debts of honour, and around 50,000 Ukrainians.

And we are not only supporting British nationals and those settled in the UK to bring potentially hundreds of thousands of their extended family from Ukraine, we are also welcoming unlimited numbers of refugees from that conflict, as the British people open their homes, in one of the biggest

movements of refugees to this country that we have ever known.

And as we work with local authorities and the devolved administrations to welcome those coming from Ukraine into our communities, we will also find accommodation across our whole United Kingdom for all those who have come here previously but who are currently in hotels, because it makes absolutely no sense for the taxpayer to foot those bills, running to almost £5 million a day, with the sum total of those we accommodate being concentrated in just a third of local authorities.

It is controlled immigration, through safe and legal routes, which enables us to make generous offers of sanctuary while managing the inevitable pressures on our public services such that we can give all those who come here the support they need to rebuild their lives, to integrate and to thrive.

But the quid pro quo for this generosity, is that we cannot sustain a parallel illegal system.

Our compassion may be infinite, but our capacity to help people is not.

We can't ask the British taxpayer to write a blank cheque to cover the costs of anyone who might want to come and live here.

Uncontrolled immigration creates unmanageable demands on our NHS and our welfare state, it overstretches our local schools, our housing and public transport, and creates unsustainable pressure to build on precious green spaces.

Nor is it fair on those who are seeking to come here legally, if others can just bypass the system.

It's a striking fact that around seven out of ten of those arriving in small boats last year were men under 40, paying people smugglers to queue jump and taking up our capacity to help genuine women and child refugees.

This is particularly perverse as those attempting crossings, are not directly fleeing imminent peril as is the intended purpose of our asylum system.

They have passed through manifestly safe countries, including many in Europe, where they could – and should – have claimed asylum.

It is this rank unfairness of a system that can be exploited by gangs, which risks eroding public support for the whole concept of asylum.

The British people voted several times to control our borders, not to close them, but to control them.

So just as Brexit allowed us to take back control of legal immigration by replacing free movement with our points-based system, we are also taking back control of illegal immigration, with a long-term plan for asylum in this country.

It is a plan that will ensure the UK has a world-leading asylum offer,

providing generous protection to those directly fleeing the worst of humanity, by settling thousands of people every year through safe and legal routes.

And I emphasise this. So whether you are fleeing Putin or Assad, our aim is that you should not need to turn to the people smugglers or any other kind of illegal option.

But to deliver it, we must first ensure that the only route to asylum in the UK is a safe and legal one, and that those who try to jump the queue, or abuse our system, will find no automatic path to settlement in our country, but rather be swiftly and humanely removed to a safe third country or their country of origin.

And the most tragic of all forms of illegal migration, which we must end with this approach, is the barbaric trade in human misery conducted by the people smugglers in the Channel.

Before Christmas 27 people drowned, and in the weeks ahead there could be many more losing their lives at sea, and whose bodies may never be recovered.

Around 600 came across the Channel yesterday. In just a few weeks this could again reach a thousand a day.

I accept that these people – whether 600 or one thousand – are in search of a better life; the opportunities that the United Kingdom provides and the hope of a fresh start.

But it is these hopes – those dreams – that have been exploited.

These vile people smugglers are abusing the vulnerable and turning the Channel into a watery graveyard, with men, women and children, drowning in unseaworthy boats, and suffocating in refrigerated lorries.

And even if they do make it here, we know only too well some of the horrendous stories of exploitation over the years, from the nail bars of East London to the cockle beds of Morecambe Bay, as illegal migration makes people more vulnerable to the brutal abuse of ruthless gangs.

So we must halt this appalling trade and defeat the people smugglers.

That is why we are passing the Nationality and Borders Bill, which allows us for the first time to distinguish between people coming here legally and illegally, and for this distinction to affect how your asylum claim progresses and your status in the UK if that claim is successful.

It will enable us to issue visa penalties against those countries that refuse to accept returns of foreign criminals and failed asylum seekers.

It will clean up the abuse of our legal system, introducing a one-stop shop that will end the cycle of last minute and vexatious claims and appeals that so often thwart or delay removals.

And it will end the absurd practice of asylum-seeking adults claiming to be children to strengthen their claims and access better services.

Crucially it will also allow us to prosecute those who arrive illegally, with life sentences for anyone piloting the boats. And to identify, intercept and investigate these boats, from today the Royal Navy will take over operational command from Border Force in the Channel, taking primacy for our operational response at sea, in line with many of our international partners, with the aim that no boat makes it to the UK undetected.

This will be supported with £50 million of new funding for new boats, aerial surveillance and military personnel in addition to the existing taskforce of patrol vessels, Wildcat helicopters, search and rescue aircraft, drones and remotely piloted aircraft.

This will send a clear message to those piloting the boats: if you risk other people's lives in the Channel, you risk spending your own life in prison.

People who do make it to the UK will be taken not to hotels at vast public expense, rather they will be housed in accommodation centres like those in Greece, with the first of these open shortly.

At the same time, we are expanding our immigration detention facilities, to assist with the removal of those with no right to remain in the UK.

We are investing over half a billion pounds in these efforts.

And this is on top of overhauling our arrivals infrastructure here in Kent, with new processing facilities now operational at Western Jet Foil and Manston.

But we need to go still further in breaking the business model of these gangs.

So from today, our new Migration and Economic Development Partnership will mean that anyone entering the UK illegally – as well as those who have arrived illegally since January 1st – may now be relocated to Rwanda.

This innovative approach – driven our shared humanitarian impulse and made possible by Brexit freedoms – will provide safe and legal routes for asylum, while disrupting the business model of the gangs, because it means that economic migrants taking advantage of the asylum system will not get to stay in the UK, while those in genuine need will be properly protected, including with access to legal services on arrival in Rwanda, and given the opportunity to build a new life in that dynamic country, supported by the funding we are providing.

The deal we have done is uncapped and Rwanda will have the capacity to resettle tens of thousands of people in the years ahead.

And let's be clear, Rwanda is one of the safest countries in the world, globally recognised for its record on welcoming and integrating migrants.

Later this year it will welcome leaders from across the Commonwealth, and before the pandemic, in 2018, the IMF said Rwanda was the world's fourth fastest growing economy.

We are confident that our new Migration Partnership is fully compliant with our international legal obligations, but nevertheless we expect this will be challenged in the courts, and if this country is seen as a soft touch for illegal migration by some of our partners, it is precisely because we have such a formidable army of politically motivated lawyers who for years who have made it their business to thwart removals and frustrate the Government.

So I know that this system will not take effect overnight, but I promise that we will do whatever it takes to deliver this new approach, initially within the limits of the existing legal and constitutional frameworks, but also prepared to explore any and all further legal reforms which may be necessary.

Because this problem has bedevilled our country for too long and caused far too much human suffering and tragedy, and this is the government that refuses to duck the difficult decisions, this is the government that makes the big calls, and I profoundly believe there is simply no other option.

And I say to those who would criticise our plan today, we have a plan; what is your alternative?

I know there are some who believe we should just turn these boats back at sea.

But after much study and consultation – including with Border Force, the police, national crime agency, military and maritime experts, to whom I pay tribute for all the incredible work that they do dealing with this problem as things stand – it's clear that there are extremely limited circumstances when you can safely do this in the English Channel.

And it doesn't help that this approach, I don't think, would be supported by our French partners, and relying solely on this course of action is simply not practical in my view.

I know there are others who would say that we should just negotiate a deal with France and the EU.

And we have made repeated and generous offers to our French friends and we will continue to press them and the EU for the comprehensive returns agreement that would solve this problem.

We remain grateful to the gendarmes on the beach, for the joint intelligence work and the co-operation that has stopped thousands of boats.

We would like to deepen that work and we continue to believe that a deal with France and the EU is in the national interest of all our countries.

But we must have our own framework for full sovereignty over our borders and we must find a way to stop these boats now, not lose thousands more lives while waiting for a deal that just doesn't exist.

And I know there will be a vocal minority who will think these measures are draconian and lacking in compassion. I simply don't agree.

There is no humanity or compassion in allowing desperate and innocent people to have their dreams of a better life exploited by ruthless gangs, as they are taken to their deaths in unseaworthy boats.

And there is no humanity or compassion in endlessly condemning the people smugglers, but then time and again ducking the big calls needed to break the business model of the gangs and stop these boats coming.

And there is no humanity or compassion in calling for unlimited safe and legal routes, offering the false hope of asylum in the UK to anyone who wants it, because that is just unsustainable.

There are currently 80 million displaced people in the world, many in failed States where governments can't meet their aspirations.

In an era of mobile connectivity they are a call or a text away from potentially being swept up in the tide of people smuggling.

The answer cannot be for the UK to become the haven for all of them.

That is a call for open borders by the back door, a political argument masquerading as a humanitarian policy.

Those in favour of this approach should be honest about it and argue for it openly.

We reject it, as the British people have consistently rejected it at the ballot box – in favour of controlled immigration.

We simply cannot have a policy of saying anyone who wants to live here can do so.

We've got to be able to control who comes into this country and the terms on which they remain.

And we must do this in the spirit of our history of providing refuge.

And in that way we can more than play our part in offering sanctuary to thousands fleeing persecution.

But then of course other countries must play their part too.

And that is what I think is most exciting about the partnership we have agreed with Rwanda today because we believe it will become a new international standard in addressing the challenges of global migration and people smuggling.

So I am grateful for Rwanda's leadership and partnership and we stand ready to work with other nations on similar agreements, as well as wider reforms to the international asylum framework.

As I say, we will continue to work with our French friends to tackle the gangs, we will continue to lead co-operation with crime and intelligence partners across Europe, we will continue to seek a returns agreement with the EU or with France.

But in the meantime, and for the foreseeable future, we need this new approach.

The people smugglers are undermining confidence in our borders.

They are betraying all those who do the right thing, who try to come here legally – through forms of migration or the safe and legal routes provided for refuge.

They are undermining the natural compassion and goodwill that people have towards refugees in this country.

And they are endangering human life day after day.

And though the way ahead will be hard, and though we can expect many challenges and many obstacles to be thrown up against this plan, I believe this plan is the right way forward, because the people smugglers must be stopped in order to save countless lives; and because tackling illegal migration is precisely the way to sustain a safe, legal and generous offer of sanctuary to those in need, that is in the very best traditions of this country and the values we stand for in the world.