

Statement to parliament: Statement: migrant crossings

With permission Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the number of migrants trying to cross the English Channel in small boats and what the government is doing in response.

But before that, I know the whole House will want to join me in sending our thoughts and prayers to those injured in the attack at Manchester's Victoria station on New Year's Eve and to all those affected by this cruel and senseless act.

I would also like to thank the emergency services for their courageous response.

Thankfully Mr Speaker there were no fatalities.

And I am pleased to say that all three victims have now been discharged from hospital.

Mr Speaker, let me now turn to the issue of English Channel migrant crossings.

Over recent weeks, we saw a sharp increase in the number of migrants attempting to cross the Channel to the UK in small boats.

Over 500 migrants – mostly Iranian – attempted to travel to the UK on small vessels in 2018.

80% of them attempted this in the last three months of the year.

Around 40% of the attempts were either disrupted by French law enforcement or returned to France via French agencies.

Since 1 January, a further 25 have attempted to cross the Channel but they were disrupted.

In addition, just this morning, a dinghy was discovered along the Kent coast.

A number of individuals are now going through UK immigration procedures and 1 person has been arrested.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I'm sure the House will want to join me in thanking all the law enforcement agencies and all those involved in the response for their tireless efforts over Christmas and the new year.

This includes: Border Force, Immigration Enforcement, the Coastguard, the National Crime Agency, and the RNLi many of whom I met in Dover last week.

I would also like to thank our French law enforcement partners for their

efforts to date which have been collaborative, swift and thorough.

The English Channel contains some of the busiest shipping lanes in the world the weather conditions are often treacherous and the inflatable boats that are being used are woefully ill-equipped to make such dangerous journeys.

The migrants who choose to make the trip are putting their lives in grave danger and can, at times, also create dangerous situations for our rescue services.

The reasons behind the increased crossings are diverse – and in many cases, are outside of our control.

First, instability in the regions such as the Middle East and North Africa are driving people out of their homes in search of better lives in Europe.

Second, organised crime groups are preying on and profiting from these vulnerable and often desperate people.

They are falsely promising them safe crossings to the UK – even though the journey is one of the most hazardous and the most dangerous possible.

Third, strengthened security at the French / UK border has meant it has become increasingly difficult for stowaways to illegally enter the UK in trucks and cars leading to more reckless attempts by boat.

I have been very clear that robust action is needed to protect people, our borders and to deter illegal migration.

Over the festive period, I took the decision to declare the situation a 'Major Incident'.

I appointed a dedicated Gold Command and I stepped up the UK's response.

As part of joint action agreed with the French, I have ordered two UK Border Force boats to be redeployed from overseas to patrol the Channel.

This is in addition to the two already undertaking enhanced patrols in these waters.

This will mean 4 Border Force Cutters in total.

And this is in addition to the 2 Coastal Patrol Vessels currently operating and aerial surveillance of the area.

Last week, I also requested additional help from the Ministry of Defence while we await the return of the 2 boats currently overseas.

I am grateful that the Royal Navy has kindly offered the use of HMS Mersey which started patrols on Friday.

I am also continuing to discuss with the French, what more they can do to stop people from attempting to make these crossings from France in the first place.

I welcome the action plan that the French have outlined just this Friday which includes a commitment to increased surveillance and security in maritime areas prevention campaigns in French coastal areas to stop people from setting off in the boats in the first place and a reinforced fight against smuggling gangs.

I'm also pleased to say that The National Crime Agency has also redoubled its efforts.

Last week, two men were arrested on suspicion of the illegal movement of migrants.

In addition, we're doing important work in the home countries of the would be migrants to reduce factors which compel them to make these dangerous journeys in the first place.

For example, we're helping to create jobs, to build infrastructure, tackling modern slavery, providing education and delivering life-saving humanitarian assistance in response to conflicts and natural disasters.

We're also doing important work to undermine organised crime groups and we've committed £2.7 billion to the humanitarian response in Syria making us the second biggest unilateral donor to the region.

We are also on track to resettle 20,000 refugees fleeing the conflict in Syria by 2020 as well as up to 3,000 of the most vulnerable people from the Middle East and North Africa, including children at risk of exploitation and abuse.

In 2017, the UK resettled more refugees under national resettlement programmes than any other EU state.

Let me reassure the House that I am continuing to monitor the issue of Channel crossings daily.

Rt Hon and Hon Members will know that these crossings have also provoked a debate.

But I'm not afraid to say that I think there are some legitimate questions that need to be asked.

Why, for instance, are so many people choosing to cross the Channel from France to the UK when France itself is a safe country?

The widely accepted international principle is that those seeking asylum should claim it in the first safe country that they reach – be that France or elsewhere.

Indeed, many asylum seekers do just this.

Domestic legislation from 2004 clearly states that if an individual travels through a safe third country and fails to claim asylum, it will be taken into account in assessing the credibility of their claim.

Following these recent events, I have instructed my officials to look at how we can tighten this further and ensure these provisions are working effectively.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Britain has a proud tradition of welcoming and protecting asylum seekers.

We also have a long history of accepting economic migrants too – people like my very own parents.

But all these routes need to be safe and they need to be controlled.

Getting in a rubber dinghy is not.

That is why I will not accept these Channel crossings as just a matter of a fact of life.

Safeguarding lives and protecting the UK border are crucial Home Office priorities.

And while we have obligations to genuine asylum seekers and we will uphold we will not standby and allow reckless criminals to take advantage of vulnerable people.

Encouraging people to dangerously cross the Channel to come here is not an act of compassion.

So I will continue to do all I can to stop these dangerous crossings.

I commend this statement to the House.