

Home Secretary's speech on Channel drownings

With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the tragic drownings that took place in the Channel yesterday.

At least 27 people lost their lives. I know the whole House will join me in expressing our profound sorrow, and our thoughts are with the loved ones of those who have died, and with those who responded to an extremely distressing event.

Information is still being gathered about the situation in France as this becomes more and more clearer.

The Prime Minister chaired an emergency COBRA meeting last night and then spoke to the President of France.

I am glad that President Macron indicated his determination to stop the vile people-smuggling gangs and, importantly, to work closely with all partners across Europe.

I have literally, Madam Deputy Speaker, just spoken again with my French counterpart Minister Darmanin, and I have once again reached out and made my offer very clear to France in terms of joint France and UK co-operation, joint patrols to prevent these dangerous journeys from taking place.

I have offered to work with France to put more officers on the ground and do absolutely whatever is necessary to secure the area so that vulnerable people do not risk their lives by getting into unseaworthy boats.

Madam Deputy Speaker, there is a global illegal migration crisis.

As I have stated many times, these journeys across the Channel are absolutely unnecessary, but also as I have been warning for two years, they are also lethally dangerous. What happened yesterday was a dreadful shock. It was not a surprise but it is also a reminder of how vulnerable people are put at peril when in the hands of criminal gangs.

There is also, Madam Deputy Speaker, no quick fix. This is about addressing long-term pull factors, smashing the criminal gangs that treat human beings as cargo, and tackling supply chains.

This requires co-ordinated international effort and I have been in constant contact with my counterparts from France, Poland, Austria, Belgium, Italy, and Greece to name just a few.

Because of the nature of the crisis and the fact that we are seeing 80 million displaced people in the world, this was of course, Madam Deputy Speaker, a major theme of discussion at the G7 Interior Ministers back in September.

We are also seeing it play out on several land borders in Europe and in the Mediterranean Sea, and given the chance, the traffickers will always find people to exploit and manipulate – some of them do not even know they are coming to the UK.

This does mean tackling issues upstream and not waiting until people have reached EU countries, and I have always been extremely clear that I want to co-operate, and am co-operating, with international colleagues.

The United Kingdom has given its unflinching and generous support to France to end this terrible trade in people smuggling.

We are not working just to end these crossings because we don't care and we're heartless. The United Kingdom has a clear and a generous, humane approach to asylum seekers and refugees.

Yes, people should come here legally and the system must be fair, but the main issue is this: crossing the Channel in small boats is extremely dangerous and yesterday was the moment that many of us had feared for many years.

The criminals that facilitate these journeys are motivated by self-interest and profit, not by compassion. They threaten, intimidate, bully, and assault the people who get into these boats, and they have a complete absolute disregard for human right.

They use the money they make for other heinous crimes, and we simply have to break their business model and, of course, bring them to justice.

The government's New Plan for Immigration, which will be put into law through the Nationality and Borders Bill is a longer-term solution that will address many of these underlying factors to deterring illegal migration and addressing underlying pull factors into the UK's asylum system.

It will bring in a range of measures, including:

the one-stop appeals process;

the ability to process claims outside the country;

the ability to declare inadmissibility to our asylum system and have differentiation for those who arrive in the UK having passed through safe countries; and

life sentences for people-smugglers.

People should, Madam Deputy Speaker, claim asylum in the first safe country they reach, and nobody needs to flee France in order to be safe.

However, Madam Deputy Speaker, we are not waiting until the Nationality and Borders Bill passes. We are undertaking a wide range of operational and diplomatic work.

I have already approved maritime tactics – including boat turn-arounds – for Border Force to deploy.

The government, the police, the National Crime Agency, are taking action at every level to take down the people-smuggling gangs. Once again, however, we cannot do it alone.

We continue to work closely with the French to prevent crossings. More than 20,000 have been stopped this year, which I think all member of this House should recognise the magnitude and the scale of the illegal migration crisis that we are seeing. We have dismantled 17 organised criminal groups and secured over 400 arrests and 65 convictions.

But this crisis continues, clearly demonstrating we need to do more, together. This is a complicated issue and there is no simple fix.

It does mean a Herculean effort and will be impossible without close co-operation between all international partners and agencies.

I also urge colleagues to reconsider their opposition to the Nationality and Borders Bill because it is an essential element in finding a long-term solution to what is, Madam Deputy Speaker, a long-term problem that successive governments have faced over decades.

As we mourn those who have died in the most horrendous of circumstances, I hope that the whole House can come together to send a clear message that crossing the Channel in this lethal way, in a small boat, is not the way to come to our country.

It is, of course, unnecessary, illegal, and desperately unsafe.

I commend this statement to the House.