

# **The Nationality and Borders Bill will only cause more suffering and death**

Despite being touted by the UK government as a way to fix the current asylum system, the proposed Nationality and Borders Bill will only further endanger and criminalize those that are most in need of our solidarity, writes Sophie McCann.

Three years ago, I was working in Moria camp, the largest and possibly most notorious refugee camp in Europe on the Greek island of Lesbos. A former army barracks built to house just under 3,000 people, Moria camp was chronically overcrowded and, at its peak in 2020, had a population of over 20,000 people, one-third of whom were children.

The squalid conditions these migrants were forced to live in were harrowing: hygiene facilities so scarce that hundreds shared one shower, there were no toilets in some parts of the camps, families had to sleep in summer tents in the freezing winter, and rubbish piled high around them.

I met young children showing signs of severe distress and some were self-harming. Children were bitten by scorpions, snakes, and rats. Access to healthcare inside the camp was virtually non-existent and food shortages were the norm. Violence was an everyday reality and deprivation was everywhere. It was a dystopian hell.

At the time, I was disgusted by the anti-refugee rhetoric spreading through Europe. How could people not see that these were vulnerable human beings who had a right to protection?

“In the name of ‘fixing the broken asylum system’ the British government is planning to bring in some of the most punitive, cruel and dangerous migration policies in the world”

Now in 2022, I hear the same populist anti-refugee rhetoric being wielded against people trying to reach the UK on boats in the English Channel – this time in the form of the British government’s Nationality and Borders Bill.

If passed, the bill will criminalise men, women and children trying to reach sanctuary in the UK with potentially fatal consequences. It will violate the Refugee Convention and other international legal obligations and undermine the UK's international standing. We must try and stop it.

### Terrifying possibilities

In the name of “fixing the broken asylum system,” the British government is planning to bring in some of the most punitive, cruel and dangerous migration policies in the world. The Home Office claims the bill will help to save lives, but we know that more lives will be lost as a result of their dangerous and illogical measures.

Plans to expand the use of large-scale asylum accommodation, replicating the Greek island approach, terrify me. These measures confine people to prison-like facilities, severely impacting their access to vital services and damaging their mental and physical health. I know – I have seen it happen.

I am appalled that the government considers Napier Barracks, a former military site where hundreds of newly arrived asylum seekers in the UK have been sent, a “prototype” for larger-scale facilities. Conditions in Napier have been decried by multiple independent investigators, the High Court, NGOs and, most importantly, the inhabitants themselves.

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The #AntiRefugeeBill, or Nationality and Borders Bill, returns to Parliament today.

Here's a reminder of the dangers of this inhumane legislation and how you can become a part of the growing movement against it.

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We're at a critical point where the UK Gov could erode the fundamental right of claiming asylum.

Under the Gov's proposed Borders Bill, unaccompanied children and torture survivors can be criminalised and denied vital protections.

Let's not allow this!

<https://msf.me/3n9jynx>

Proposals for offshore detention facilities are meanwhile extremely alarming. This would allow asylum seekers to be removed to another country and detained there indefinitely while their claims are processed.

My colleagues who worked on Nauru Island, where the Australian government implemented a similar policy, witnessed some of the worst mental health suffering recorded in MSF's 50 years of existence. Almost one-third of our 208 patients attempted suicide. Children as young as nine years old tried to kill themselves.

If these measures were not bad enough, the government is also attempting to enable pushbacks of migrant boats in the Channel. This is not only dangerous but a flagrant violation of international law. MSF's search and rescue teams in the Mediterranean Sea have seen first-hand the deadly consequences of attempts to push back small boats and refusal to rescue those onboard.

Over 1,500 people drowned in the Central Mediterranean in 2021 because of UK and EU-backed policies that undermine effective search and rescue. If the UK adopts this approach in the English Channel, it is inevitable that more people will die.

### Counterproductive measures

Not only is the Nationality and Borders Bill cruel, but it will also be ineffective and counterproductive. Harsher detention policies and pushbacks will not stop people seeking safety, it will only make their journeys more dangerous. Lives will be lost in a pointless battle where the casualties will be vulnerable and persecuted people.

Perversely, while the British government repeats talking points about the need for people to arrive through "legal routes," it has made it virtually impossible for people to reach the UK through official channels.

The Dubs Scheme, focused on relocating unaccompanied child refugees from within Europe, and family reunification pathways have been shut down. The only remaining option is the painfully slow UNHCR resettlement scheme, which resettles fewer than 1% of the world's refugees every year.

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operations that prey on vulnerable people, but this bill actually risks pushing more people into the hands of these dangerous gangs”

The UK government has also failed to establish a functioning scheme to enable individuals in immediate danger to legally enter the UK. Six months after the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme was announced, the programme has only just formally opened and the first to be “resettled” include those already evacuated to the UK. Those still in Afghanistan are forced to wait while the humanitarian situation further deteriorates.

As MSF is one of the few international organizations left providing medical care, my colleagues in Afghanistan see the crisis unfolding daily. People cannot simply wait and hope their time for resettlement will come soon. Yet if they attempt to reach the UK via irregular routes, they will face criminalisation and indefinite detention under measures set out in the Nationality and Borders Bill.

The British government claims it wants to stamp out people smuggling operations that prey on vulnerable people, but this bill actually risks pushing more people into the hands of these dangerous gangs.

The Home Office’s own Equality Impact Assessment of the Nationality and Borders Bill found “there is a risk that increased security and deterrence could encourage these cohorts to attempt riskier means of entering the UK.”

Migrants, refugees and asylum seekers are not the faceless mass that the government attempts to portray them as, but real people who want to be safe. Many have already endured torture, sexual violence, and imprisonment, not to mention the perilous journey to the UK, which nobody undertakes lightly.

The Nationality and Borders Bill is a deliberate and racist attempt by the UK government to shirk its obligations to these vulnerable people. It is inhumane, punitive, and doomed to fail.

Demonizing and criminalizing people who arrive on boats will not fix the broken asylum system – it will only cause further suffering to the people who need our solidarity and care the most.

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Sophie McCann is advocacy officer at MSF UK and former advocacy manager for

MSF's operations in Greece.

Have questions or comments? Email us at: [editorial-english@alaraby.co.uk](mailto:editorial-english@alaraby.co.uk)

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Source:

<https://english.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/nationality-borders-bill-will-only-cause-more-suffering>

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