

UK - Rwanda bill: Will it deter small boat crossings?

00:00

This is the Global News Podcast from the BBC World Service. I'm Janet Julio, and at 13 hours GMT on Tuesday, the 23rd of April, these are our main stories: Just hours after the British government passed a contentious bill to deport migrants to Rwanda, five people died trying to sail to the UK from France in a distressing scene witnessed by our reporter.

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There were just far too many people trying to squeeze inside this little inflatable dinghy. What we've since learned is that we were watching people almost certainly being crushed underfoot, perhaps suffocated, trampled to death.

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A father begins legal action against oil giant BP over his son's cancer death in Iraq. NASA's furthest flung probe, carrying messages from Earth, finally phones home after five months of no contact. Also in this podcast:

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If I'd asked a year ago, my family or anybody else if it was a good idea to run topless, I'm sure 100 percent of them would have said no. I don't think so, but I didn't ask, and I did it.

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The woman who raced topless in the London Marathon to show her mastectomy scars.

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Just hours after the British government finally managed to push through a controversial bill to deport asylum-seekers to Rwanda, there's been a poignant reminder of the human costs of people illegally trying to enter Britain. At least five people, including a child, have died while

trying to cross the channel from France.

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Our correspondent, Andrew Harding, was on the beach near Calais as people there tried to board an inflatable boat, and he witnessed the chaos that followed. We should warn you that some of his report is deeply distressing.

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Suddenly, we heard a noise, and it was the police shouting that they'd spotted some migrants. And we ran with the police and saw about a hundred, perhaps more than a hundred migrants running across the beach. It was damp; the tide had just gone out. They had several hundred meters to run towards the sea. They were dragging an inflatable, and as the police got closer, essentially a fight began as the smugglers and the migrants started bringing out sticks and rods, essentially forming a protective curtain around the migrants to allow them to continue advancing towards the sea to take their boat into the water. They were throwing firecrackers as well, so there were explosions; there was smoke. The police seemed unable to do anything. They said later that they didn't want to interfere. They saw children there; that it was too dangerous; that the migrants were already in the water. What happened then was that they got into a boat, and we saw it drift slowly just a few yards off the shore. But we could very quickly tell that there was trouble going on in the boat itself. There were just far too many people trying to squeeze inside this little inflatable dinghy, and you could see people standing in the middle. And what we've since learned is that we were watching people almost certainly being crushed underfoot, perhaps suffocated, trampled to death.

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We've heard reports that some people may have drowned. That's not clear. We saw some life jackets in the water; we heard some cries, but at that time it was not clear to us what was happening. It felt like just a melee that we've seen before as people try and fight for a spot on the life raft on the inflatable. And then the boat drifted a bit further out to sea. We could see some small rescue boats from a much bigger French rescue ship starting to approach the boat. But at that point, we still had no sense that anyone was injured. We assumed that they were simply trying to offer help and perhaps to push the boat back to shore if it was required because

the boat was not under power; it was stalled; it was just drifting.

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These deaths came as British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has pledged that asylum seekers will start being flown to Rwanda within the next three months. The British Supreme Court had ruled the scheme was unlawful, but the Home Office Minister, Andrew Sharp, said Rwanda was a safe country for people to be processed.

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This bill does comply with international law. It is profoundly moral and patriotic to defend the integrity of our borders. It's profoundly moral and patriotic to prevent the needless loss of life in the channel and to put the criminal gangs out of business.

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But Stephen Kinnock from the opposition Labour Party in Britain said the asylum bill was an expensive gimmick and wouldn't stop desperate people dying.

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The test of a policy like this is, will it work as a deterrent? But when you're dealing with people who have risked life and limb to cross continents, they are not going to be put off by a one percent chance of being sent to Rwanda. So the policy fails on its own terms.

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Our political correspondent, Rob Watson, told us more about how the new law is being seen in the UK and wider afield.

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It's hugely significant not just here in the UK but globally. Here in the UK because the Rwanda plans policy is an absolute keynote for Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and intended as a profound

political dividing line with the main opposition Labour Party. But globally, because no Western country, no country has tried anything like this. I mean, yes, there have been the idea of processing the claims of asylum seekers in a third country with the aim of maybe coming back to the country. That sort of what Australia did, but this is unique in the sense that these are one-way flights. The idea is you're sent to Rwanda; that's it, you file your claim there and not in the UK.

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But the UN has called on Britain now to rethink this plan.

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It has indeed been a truly sort of scathing statement, a joint statement by the UN High Commissioners for both Refugees and Human Rights. And I'm going to read you a little bit of it for everybody. "The new legislation marks a further step away from the UK's long tradition of providing refuge to those in need, in breach of the refugee Convention," they said. They also go on to say that the new law seriously hinders the rule of law in the UK and sets a perilous precedent globally. And that's the point that I was making in answer to your first question. The reason why it's significant is that this hasn't been tried. The UN doesn't like the idea. The UK government argues that this is what is actually needed not just in Britain but elsewhere in order to try and disrupt global migration movements.

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And the key question is, will it work? A lot of skepticism about that, given the fact that so many people risk their lives already to try to reach Britain.

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Yes. And the other argument that you heard from the Labour spokesman, which is essentially if you've got 30,000 people arriving last year, 40,000 last year, would sending 2, 3, 400 to Rwanda really be a deterrent? But absolutely, that is the test.

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And a lot of people are saying part of the reason the prime minister has pushed this through right now is because of forthcoming elections. But will it be a big issue for voters?

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The polling suggests, Janet, that it is a big issue, along with the cost of living and the state of the economy. But here's the difficult thing for the government. The polling suggests that most people don't like the idea of migrants crossing the channel. The polling also suggests that they approve of the idea of sending people away on planes, whether to Rwanda or to anywhere else, but—and you knew there was a 'but' coming—the polling also suggests that the government is so massively unpopular that even if planes do go to Rwanda, even if there were a sort of deterrent effect, it probably wouldn't have any effect on the conservatives' rather miserable fortunes at the moment.