

'Stop the Boats' Plan: The Most Appropriate Solution for the Current UK

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Abstract: The 'Stop the Boats' plan serves to address the increasing number of illegal asylum seekers arriving at the UK's national borders. Following the public release of this plan, there has been a considerable outbreak of negative responses, criticising it as an act of anti-humanitarianism, with certain legal challenges and high financial costs. Nevertheless, a thorough analysis reveals that none of these critiques is relevant in the political realm. To further demonstrate the efficacy of the 'Stop the Boats' initiative, two alternative policies have been evaluated. One is to accept part of or all illegal asylum seekers and another one is a reject-all approach. However, both alternatives have been found to be less appropriate due to a number of significant deficiencies that affect multiple aspects beyond what can be avoided. Hence, the 'Stop the Boats' plan, which is seeking a balance between the two polar situations, has been proven to be the most feasible asylum plan for the current circumstances.

Keywords: 'Stop the Boats', asylum seeker, refugee crisis, illegal immigrant, Rishi Sunak

1. Introduction

Numerous developed countries are grappling with the constant challenge of a refugee crisis, among which the UK also encounters challenges over its willingness and capacity to resettle refugees. Besides refugees who legally claim asylum from the UK government, there is also a group of involuntary speculators who travelled in small boats operated by people smugglers, crossing the English Channel from various locations to reach the national border of Britain.

To tackle the problem of the increasing number of small boats breaching the UK's national border, Rishi Sunak's government launched the 'Stop The Boats' plan and made it one of five immediate priorities for its term of office [1]. The plan stipulates that individuals who illegally enter the UK will be detained and promptly deported to their home country if it is safe to do so, or to a third country where their asylum claim will be considered and assessed; once deported, illegal immigrants have no right to re-enter, settle or gain citizenship in the UK [2].

This paper aims to discuss both the limitations and encouragements of this policy and its alternatives. After the discussion, it is clear that although the 'Stop the Boats' plan might not serve as an impeccable solution to the illegal immigration issue, yet it stands as the best among the alternatives.

2. Limitations of the 'Stop the Boats' plan

Upon the public release of the 'Stop the Boats' plan, it has garnered a significant amount of criticism in the following three areas. However, upon scrutiny, none of the criticism holds any significant weight in the political arena.

2.1. An anti-humanitarian act

The plan was primarily attacked on its inhumanity and cruelty [3], arguing that the government's reluctance to compromise law and order for a group of illegal immigrants who put their personal gains ahead of the law and justice is unacceptable.

The foundation behind these concerns rests on the 'world-systems theory', viewing the whole world as a single capitalist system in which poorer nations, the periphery, provide a constant supply of cheap labour to underpin the dominant and affluent nations situated at the system's core [4]. In other words, as the flourishing and dominance of core states cannot be achieved without the constant input of basic resources and labour force from semi-periphery and periphery states, it is considered to be a moral obligation for core states to have an active response towards crisis from others.

Especially for the UK, a country that grew more powerful through centuries of colonisation, during which it enslaved, subdued and exploited people. The 'Stop the Boats' plan causes anger because the UK government turned a blind eye to its own inhumane actions while making it, applying a double standard of self-interest at the expense of others.

2.2. Legal challenges

Alongside moral judgement, critics have also tried to prove that the plan is unacceptable from a legal perspective. The main argument is that the provisions of the Illegal Migration Act 2023, the foundation for the 'Stop the Boats' initiative, contravene the rights enshrined by the 1961 Refugee Convention and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) [5, 6]. Legal obstacles impede the UK government's efforts to combat irregular immigration, including the stagnation of the Rwanda Asylum Plan, an immigration policy whereby people identified by the UK government as asylum seekers will be transferred to Rwanda for processing, asylum and resettlement [7]. It is embroiled in litigation since the Court of Appeal ruled that Rwanda was an unsafe third country for asylum seekers, which has prevented the scheme from moving forward [8].

It is noteworthy that the dismissal of the 'Stop the Boats' plan on the basis of the Court of Appeal overturn is not persuasive. The Court of Appeal merely held that Rwanda could not be defined as a safe third country because of the deficiencies in its asylum procedures, rather than holding that the act of deporting illegal immigrants to a safe third country was unlawful [9]. Meanwhile, in a statement issued shortly after the verdict, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said the government would seek approval to appeal the ruling to the Supreme Court, describing Rwanda as a safe choice for deportation. Additionally, the government of Rwanda had also issued a statement disputing the UK Court of Appeal's claim that Rwanda is not a safe country for asylum seekers. It argues that Rwanda is one of the safest countries in the world and has been acknowledged by the UNHCR and other international organisations for its model response to refugees.

2.3. High financial costs

In addition to the accusations of the human rights advocates, the extremely high financial costs of this plan and the economic effectiveness of the current scheme has also been brought to question. According to the economic impact assessment of the Illegal Migration Act 2023, the gross cost of relocating an individual is estimated at £169,000, which is £63,000 more than keeping them in the

UK [10]. This includes a payment of around £105,000 per person to the country willing to grant asylum to the refugee, plus £22,000 for flights and escorting the individual [11].

This claim rests on clear contractarian principles, meaning that the state itself and its actions are granted legitimacy only by citizens' consent [12]. Similar to freedoms and rights, citizens have willingly ceded some of their incomes to the government, known as tax, in exchange for the government providing public goods and services to the collective, made of taxpayers. Thus, any governmental spending on non-taxpayers will be criticised as deviating from this principle, raising questions about its legitimacy. In this case, the additional cost of £63,000 per asylum seeker resulting from the UK government's 'Stop the Boats' plan can be interpreted as a misallocation of its financial resources due to the economic ineffectiveness of this policy. As a consequence, the government will fail to deliver the expected amount of public goods and services to citizens in return for the amount of taxes they pay, violating the fiscal contract theory between the government and its citizens in a democratic state [13].

However, in assessing the effectiveness of policies, it is imperative to analyse the enduring knock-on effects in addition to the immediate impacts of policy measures [14]. As the UK government strives to maintain a balance between its compliance with humanitarian duty and protection of the benefits of UK citizens, outsourcing the settlement of illegal asylum seekers at a higher cost in the short term could potentially mitigate greater losses in the long term, which may include ongoing expenditures such as welfare benefits, social housing, health insurance and public education [15].

Furthermore, the 'Stop the Boats' plan may prove to be economically efficient in the long run. This is because the core objective of the scheme is to reduce the number of illegal asylum seekers to a manageable level for the UK government through deterrence, as opposed to the current situation where excessive arrivals of illegal asylum seekers exacerbate a broken asylum system that incurs a cost of £3.6 billion to the UK government annually [16]. In contrast, the economic assessment of the Illegal Migration Bill suggests that the 'Stop the Boats' plan only needs to achieve a 2% deterrence in arrivals to generate cost savings, indicating that the UK taxpayers could potentially save over £100,000 per every illegal migrant deterred from making a small boat crossing if the Bill is enacted.

3. No better alternatives

Although the 'Stop the Boats' plan has inevitable shortcomings, it is the most appropriate option if analysed from other alternatives that the UK government might consider in order to tackle the 'small boats' predicament.

3.1. Alternative one: accepting part of or all illegal asylum seekers

One alternative policy is to adhere to humanitarian principles to an extreme extent, not only refraining from holding illegal asylum seekers culpable for jeopardising border security, but also furnishing them with fundamental living conditions that conform to the European Convention on Human Rights. Although it is widely recognised that pursuing universalist principles of extending moral obligation and responsibility towards refugees is inherently desirable, such idealistic aspirations will come at an extremely high cost, not only to the British government and public, but also to seemingly gainful asylum seekers [17].

Firstly, it is vital to recognise the internal costs. Assuming the UK opens its borders to welcome small boats, a surge in the number of asylum seekers shall be predicted. This would result in a significant financial burden that would be impossible to manage, followed by further consequences of putting enormous pressure on public services and compromising the well-being of British citizens. For instance, even in 2022, when the UK did not open up its borders, the asylum system was already on the verge of collapse, due to the increase in illegal small boat arrivals [2]. It made the total cost of

the asylum system around £3 billion a year and rising. One of the most challenging components faced by the government is the inadequate housing provision for asylum seekers. The number of available properties fell short of meeting the vast demand, compelling the Home Office to enlist private contractors to provide accommodation and services, which was reported to be costing almost £7 million per day [18]. Such costs create an unfair burden to British citizens. It implies that the humanitarian support that asylum seekers receive in the UK will either result in British citizens paying more taxes to the government or receiving less welfare from the government than before.

Furthermore, accepting refugees typically involves ongoing responsibilities and expenditures, including the long-term provision of housing support, cash allowances, free NHS healthcare, and access to free public schooling and school meals [15]. The UK government is obliged to provide ongoing assistance to ensure basic living for asylum seekers, and the common taxpayers will be forced to confront significant fiscal deficits, the extent of which is uncertain due to increasing refugees. Meanwhile, the influx of asylum seekers into the UK labour market could potentially invade the employment benefits and further trap the government economically. On one hand, the government will have to maintain a certain level of financial support for asylum seekers if their access to the labour market is restricted [19]. It will place a greater burden on the state budget to deal with increased unemployment. On the other hand, if the government allows asylum seekers to enter the labour market, they are likely to occupy job slots from more vulnerable labour forces in the UK population, including women, youth, low-skilled and informal workers, and those living in disadvantaged and marginal areas [20]. It will lead to more unemployment and displacement among British citizens, putting further pressure on the national budget. Additionally, the large influx of asylum seekers via illegal means could potentially threaten the UK's social security. An investigation based on data collected in the United States has revealed that there is a strong positive correlation between the refugee inflow (% of total population) and the crime rates in all ten crime categories [21]. To ensure public order and safety, the UK government may have to consider increasing government expenditures on police force, which would be yet another financial expense borne by the British taxpayers.

Beyond the UK government and citizens, opening the country's borders to small boats would also exert disastrous consequences for outside parties. Firstly, if the UK indiscriminately accepts both legal and illegal asylum seekers, it will undermine the fairness of its asylum system, unfairly harming those who apply within the law. When the government chooses to welcome illegal asylum seekers rather than penalise them, it sends a message that illegal migration is allowed and supported. This message fuels the growth of such an unlawful action and weakens the authority and credibility of British rule of law. Moreover, the rise in boat arrivals will worsen the UK's asylum backlog, which has already reached a new all-time high recently, with 175,000 people now waiting for a decision, despite a fall in the number of asylum claims and an increase in the number of asylum officers in the Home Office [22, 23]. This will not only extend the waiting time for legal asylum seekers, but may even mean that qualified refugees who have applied via legal routes and met all the requirements will be refused to grant refugee status since the UK's refugee quota will be filled by illegal asylum seekers already.

Secondly, failing to take strict action against small boats also undermines asylum seekers' fundamental right to life, as it may encourage more people to put their lives at risk and pursue asylum through hazardous migration routes controlled by criminals. On this journey, asylum seekers would be exploited and endangered by people smugglers, who would charge them €2,500 to €3,500 per migrant on average and put them in unseaworthy small boats to cross the English Channel, one of the most dangerous and busiest shipping lanes in the world [24, 25]. According to the International Organization for Migration, (IOM) Missing Migrants Project at least 57 migrants drowned in the English Channel trying to reach the UK between 2018 and 2022. Yet such a tough policy, like the

'Stop the Boats', is expected to be an efficient approach to disintegrate the business model of people smugglers, protecting asylum seekers from the enticement of undertaking illegal and hazardous voyages. As a result, the tragic loss of life could be prevented and the criminal gangs, which pose threats to the society, could be restrained by impeding their ability to generate substantial profits.

3.2. Alternative two: rejecting all illegal asylum seekers

Another alternative policy for the British government would be to forcibly reject all those attempting to enter the UK illegally and return them promptly to their departure country. This approach, while more populist, aims to eliminate any potential threats that may harm British society and its citizens at the point of origin. Although accepting any or all illegal asylum seekers has many adverse consequences, rejecting them all is hardly a beneficial trend.

Internally, such a hard-line policy, aimed at defending the security of national borders through deterring the vulnerable and the desperate who have little choice but to come to the UK illegally, is likely to have a frightening effect spreading into the UK, creating a sense of panic among its own public. Especially among disadvantaged groups in the UK, the sense of insecurity will be heightened due to the government's reluctance to help struggling people in need, even if there are justifiable reasons for doing so. This could be interpreted as, given the limited resources, the government prioritising the majority who have greater influences and contributions to society, even if it unequally comes at the expense of benefits for minority groups. Furthermore, such a tough policy with deterrence effects, whether it is effective or not, will to some extent create a cold-blooded party image for the Conservatives. In contrast, the Labour party, which strongly opposes the 'Stop the Boats' scheme, will take advantage of the situation and claim the moral high ground, thus creating an image of a humanitarian and caring party. In addition, due to the crucial part that political parties' public image has in manipulating citizens' voting behaviours, this is likely to have an impact on the UK's political dynamics. One could imagine that the underprivileged or minority groups who are more sympathetic to refugees will be more inclined to vote towards the Labour party because they know that Labour will stand up for minority rights.

In comparison to the domestic impacts, the UK will have to withstand more pressure and criticism from the international community if such a reject-all approach were proposed. As a defining characteristic of the post-Cold War era and contemporary international relations, the issue of refugees now figures prominently on the international policy agenda [26]. The UK, as a core member of this shared global society, is highly expected to provide asylum for refugees, actively complying with its international obligations. Therefore, if the UK attempts to shirk its international obligation to offer proper asylum to refugees, it will be violating its long-established and broad-based humanitarian commitments. Doing so will severely discredit its international reputation, turning its former global image into a vulgar populist one.

From an ethical standpoint, the UK owes it to the world - not merely because it is an economically developed country, but also because its prosperity is inextricably tied to colonisation, a process of conquering territories, exploiting locals and producing refugees. For instance, British slave owners forcibly transported thousands of people from Asia to work on British plantations for pittance pay [27]. It enabled this nation to gradually complete its primitive accumulation as a modern capitalist power, which laid the groundwork for subsequent industrialisation and modernisation, paving the way for future development. Thus, as a compensation for colonisation and asymmetrical economic development, it is obligatory for the UK to offer asylum to refugees. Even in the present-day global economy, the UK has continued to exploit natural resources and cheap labour in the less economically developed countries. Hence, whether as a former coloniser or as a current capitalist of the world, helping to tackle the world's refugee crisis should be one of the UK's key international missions.

From a legal perspective, the UK would place itself in serious contravention of its obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention and the European Convention on Human Rights, if it was to turn away all refugees [28, 29]. Such an action could signal to the international community that the UK is willing to breach its agreements for its own benefits, which will lead to the loss of trust from other countries. It may impede opportunities for potential collaboration and partnerships, posing obstacles to the UK's development in this highly globalised era. Moreover, if the UK avoids its obligation to accept refugees, it will place a heavier burden on other countries that open their borders to refugees, as refugees have one less border to turn for help [30]. Such egocentric behaviours, which prioritise national interests over international ones, may generate discontent among other refugee-hosting countries. As a result, it may lead to diplomatic tensions or even condemnation and sanctions against the UK by international organisations.

4. Conclusion

As an ever-growing tide of asylum-seekers attempt to enter the UK illegally via small boats, the UK's asylum system, which has already been severely backlogged, is becoming even more overwhelmed. In response, Rishi Sunak's government officially proposed and prioritised the 'Stop the Boats' plan, which sought to solve the problem by using tough measures to deter the potential offenders.

Following the publication of the 'Stop the Boats' plan, it attracted a great deal of criticism on the following three aspects. However, upon review, all of them were found to have minor relevance and did not constitute an effective obstacle to the policy. Firstly, the plan has been accused of being an anti-humanitarian action, as critics argue that the UK, as a country developed based on colonisation, has an obligation to help more asylum seekers. However, this objection can be countered by asserting that the UK offers legal routes for asylum seekers to gain recognition. Secondly, from a legal perspective, this plan has raised concern from the Court of Appeal on the grounds that the deportation destination assigned by the campaign was not safe. However, the criticism does not challenge the legality of the deportation, while such claims have also been challenged both by the current UK government and the Rwanda administration. Thirdly, critics have faulted this plan for inefficient expense allocation from the state budget, arguing that providing asylum is more economical than outsourcing the work to other countries. However, this criticism lacks validity as the long-term costs in various aspects have not been taken into consideration. Overall, although the 'Stop the Boats' plan has some limitations, their insignificance could demonstrate the validity and appropriateness of this plan.

Then, the examination of two alternative policies further confirms the finding that 'Stop the Boats' is the most appropriate policy for the UK. One option is to accept some or all illegal asylum seekers based on universalist values. Internally, it is unjust to the UK's citizens and insecure for the UK's society due to various economic and public safety threats associated with the influx of numerous refugees; while externally, it is also irresponsible for the lives of asylum seekers and it will indulge people smugglers, fuelling the development of such an unlawful industry. Another option is to reject all illegal asylum seekers without further assistance, on the basis of contractarian principles. As a result, this plan may spread the deterrent effects to the UK's citizens and cause political momentum on the domestic front. Meanwhile, it will also damage the UK's international image and reputation, leading to diplomatic tensions or even isolation. Accordingly, the 'Stop the Boats' plan, by balancing between two extremes, has been shown to be the most sustainable plan to deal with the current problems.

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