

News Migration

Germany is last stop in rush to cross the Channel

Matt Dathan Home Affairs Editor
Tom Ball Washington

Germany has become the main hub for illegal migrants before they head to Britain in small boats, police and the government suspect.

Six in ten of all Channel migrants now arrive in France on the day that they board a boat, crossing Europe's open borders mainly from Belgium and the Netherlands.

Intelligence gathering by the government and police suggests that migrants gather in Germany after they cross the eastern borders into the EU.

In the past fortnight a crisis has arisen on Poland's border with Belarus, where President Lukashenko allowed thousands of asylum seekers to gather in an effort to seek revenge on Brussels for sanctions against his regime.

Government sources said that migrants who reached the EU were put in contact with people smugglers who operated out of hotels in Germany.

Angela Merkel's policy of opening her country's borders to more than a million Syrian refugees in 2016 was seen as being to blame for people smugglers using the country as a base.

A government source said: "It's become the established hub for criminal gangs."

It was also suggested that the organised criminals were forced into Germany after British and French police worked together to force them out of northern France, cutting down on the supply of small boats and life jackets.

Border Force, the law enforcement agency, has reported that boats used by people smugglers to ferry migrants across the Channel are getting bigger.

The largest boat reported so far was a vessel two weeks ago that carried 88 migrants. The estimated value of the single crossing to people smugglers was believed to have been about £250,000.

Government sources said that the crossings were a profitable business

even with a 50 per cent success rate. French officials have so far intercepted 19,000 crossings this year — just less than half of all attempted crossings.

The Home Office claims that nine in ten of the organised crime gang leaders are Iranian, Syrian and Kurdish Iraqis.

Priti Patel, the home secretary, has plans to open offshore asylum centres where migrants will be sent for processing within seven days of arriving.

Britain is in talks with Albania and other countries about the possibility of opening reception centres where asylum seekers can be sent while their claims are assessed. There are concerns, however, that there is nothing to prevent migrants leaving the centres to head back to the UK.

Attaching strict conditions that they must adhere to in order for their claims to be considered is regarded as one way to prevent the migrants fleeing from the asylum centres.

Detaining them fully would be a breach of the 1951 Refugee Convention but Patel will still need to change the law because under the proposal, migrants would effectively be detained during certain times, such as overnight.

Patel is hoping to emulate Greece, which opened an asylum centre this year on the island of Samos, which she visited in summer.

She also wants to copy Greece's digitalisation of migrant processing, under which asylum seekers are given smartphones so that they can track their claims. Asylum seekers then download an app that enables them to find out what stage their application is at.

Most migrants have phones when they arrive in the UK but the Home Office is looking at opening computer facilities to help them keep track of claims. A government source said: "It will speed up the system and cut costs."

Letters, page 36
The government has over promised on migrants, leading article, page 37
Matt Chorley, page 39



Marder Ibrahim, 18, from Kurdistan, among the chaos of a migrants camp in northern France where police are struggling to deal with a huge influx of families

Small boats become big business for Calais gangs

In the camp at Grande-Synthe near Dunkirk, migrants were searching the debris of burnt tents and sleeping bags for their possessions (Tom Ball writes). The site had been cleared and destroyed by French police early on Wednesday. A boy looked for his scarf. His mother wondered where the family would sleep that night.

Among the desperate people was one man who stood out. Dressed in expensive clothes and talking

quickly into an iPhone, the man seemed little concerned by the devastation around him.

He was, *The Times* was told, a smuggler. Asked for information about him, Azad Zellmi, 25, a Kurdish man from Iran, refused to say. "If I tell you, they will shoot me in the head," he said.

Soon after, the smuggler approached and tried to stop *The Times* from talking to migrants. "Leave this place," he said.

He was a small cog in what is becoming a sophisticated and lucrative operation in transporting people across the Channel in small boats. What was once a route operated by migrants themselves is now big business for organised crime groups, investigators say. As competition grows, it is a business that is turning violent.

There have been reports of smugglers forcing unwilling

migrants into overcrowded and unstable boats at knife-point.

More than 24,500 migrants have crossed the Channel in small boats this year, almost triple the number last year. More than a thousand came on Tuesday, the second time in a week that figure has been passed.

Gangs who historically used lorries have switched to small boats, which are easier to facilitate and more profitable. This was in part necessitated by the pandemic, which saw a drop in road traffic. A large portion of the gangs are understood to be of Kurdish origin.

It is understood that the Purfleet tragedy in October 2019, when 39 Vietnamese people died in a lorry, caused a change in smuggling routes, with many migrants refusing to be smuggled that way.

"Attempts to reach the UK by small boat are incredibly dangerous, and we know a high percentage are

facilitated by organised criminal networks of varying sophistication," said a spokesman for the National Crime Agency (NCA). "These networks do not care about the safety or security of those they transport; they seek to exploit them for profit."

Some of those groups that are now running boats across the Channel are involved in modern slavery. These human traffickers operate separately from smugglers, who offer a service to paying customers, moving people across borders often against their will to work in cannabis farms, nail bars and prostitution.

Migrants in the camps spoke of rumours about "hidden" camps, often inland, where those who were victims of trafficking were held.

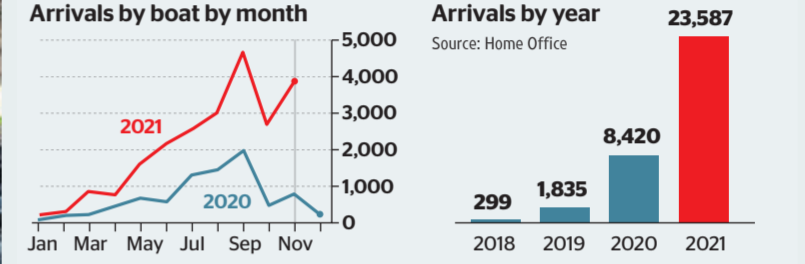
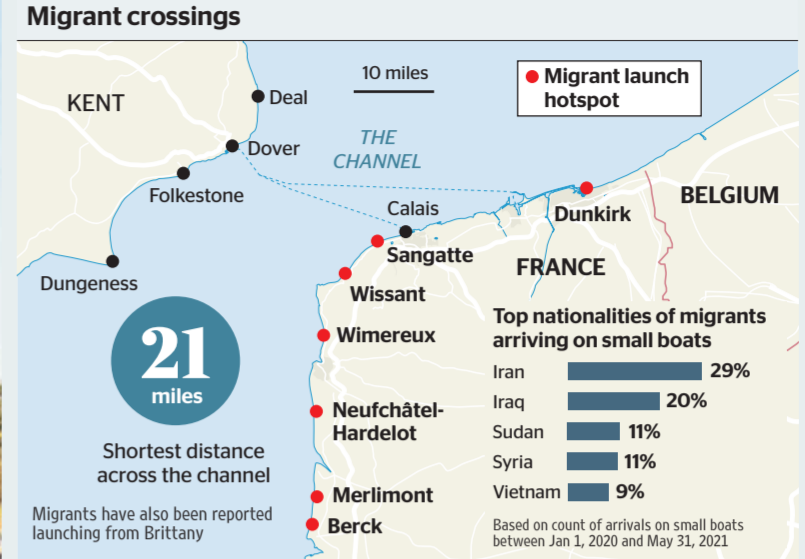
With so many gangs now in operation around Calais, competition for places to launch the

boats is fierce, said Maya Konforti, secretary of L'Auberge des Migrants, a French NGO that helps migrants living in the camps.

The cost has dropped from up to £7,000 a year ago to between £1,500 and £3,000 due to competition.

The Channel crossing is the easy part at the end of what is often a long and perilous journey.

"I consider myself already to be in the UK," said Soman Betushi, standing in a rapidly erected camp next to the evicted one at Grande-Synthe. The 26-year-old musician from Iraq is among the many migrants



recently to have entered Europe through Belarus, as part of an attempt by country's dictator-president Aleksandr Lukashenko to flood the EU with migrants in response to sanctions.

Betushi flew to Minsk from Istanbul. He was held at a camp outside the capital for a week before being driven with 300 others to the border with Poland. There Belarusian soldiers "clipped the wire" and told them to run, he said. He walked for several days through the Polish countryside and eventually managed to reach Germany before entering France.

"This is the easy part," he said. "I arrived yesterday, already found a smuggler, paid my money and hopefully tomorrow or the next day I will be on a boat."

Many others in the camp, all from either Iran or Iraq, had taken the same route. Soman Ahmed, 39, described appalling treatment at the hands of the Belarusian soldiers, who he said beat and robbed him.

Thousands of migrants were held in camps where they were given no food for days.

Every evening through until dawn French police,

armed with night vision goggles and rubber bullet weapons, patrol the beaches around Calais where migrants have been known to attempt a crossing.

Despite more resources, police are often unable to stop the migrants. One police officer on a beach near Wimereux early on Thursday admitted that when faced with dozens of migrants it can be difficult to prevent them from making it into the water. It was reported that an officer had had his ear bitten off by someone trying to lurch into the Channel.

There have been a number of arrests of smugglers, found driving near beaches. However, arrests and prosecutions "only scratch the surface", said Tim Loughton, Tory chairman of the Commons home affairs select committee.

"The smuggling business has mushroomed disproportionately," he said. "This is a huge moneyspinner. When smugglers do get arrested, there is a raft of people ready to fill their shoes."

Enver Solomon, chief executive of the Refugee Council, said that while there had been a big rise in the number of people crossing the Channel in small boats, the overall number of people claiming asylum in the UK had remained fairly static over recent years.

"The increased use of small boats represents a shift in the method of entry people are using to reach the UK, rather than a rise in the number of people claiming asylum in the UK."

Those fleeing poverty take paths that are well travelled

Analysis

The migrant crisis on Poland's border has grabbed headlines but far from the latest hotspot there has been a steady rise in clandestine migration to Europe this year as people fleeing war and poverty continue to rely on more traditional routes (Tom Kington writes).

Just over 160,000 migrants arrived on the continent in the first ten months of the year, the majority via the Balkans and by sea to Italy, 70 per cent up on last year when pandemic travel restrictions curtailed the flow.

However, the number of arrivals between January and October is also 45 per cent up on 2019, before coronavirus struck, according to Frontex, the EU's border agency.

That is far lower than the one million migrants, half of them Syrians escaping their civil war, who made it to Europe in 2015, but officials expect the number to rise as Afghans seek to escape the crisis started by the Taliban take over of their country.

"Bear in mind there were already two million Afghans outside their country before the fall of Kabul and they are on the move," a Frontex spokesman said.

The death of a one-year-old Syrian child in the woods on the Polish-Belarus border this week highlighted the plight of those lured there, and migrant deaths in the Mediterranean and Atlantic have already reached 2,475 this year. Ten people were asphyxiated by petrol fumes this week on a boat from Libya.

While 59,000 migrants have made it to Italy by sea, up from 32,000 by this time last year, the route from Libya has proved the deadliest in the Mediterranean, according to official statistics, with 1,236 perishing. Another 898 people have died sailing from the coast of Africa to the Canary Islands — an expanding route used by 16,000 this year — but one official said the true toll could be double that.

"Charities working there report the real number is closer to 2,000 dead," Flavio di Giacomo, a spokesman for the UN's International Organisation for Migration (IOM), said.

After a fall in the number of Nigerians sailing to Italy this year, Egyptians, Bangladeshis and Tunisians make up the majority of arrivals, with most likely to try to stay in Italy, although Tunisians may try to get to France, di Giacomo said.

After a clampdown on sea crossings from Turkey to Greece, 9,000 migrants have paid up to €12,000 each to be taken from Turkey to the southern shores of Italy this year.

"Prices are however getting so high on that route, many are sticking to the Balkans land route as the way to get into Europe," di Giacomo added.

Nearly 50,000 migrants have made it through the Balkans from Turkey this year, of whom half were Syrian.

Laura Lungarotti, the IOM's chief of mission in Bosnia Herzegovina, said: "They want to go to Germany or Italy — the UK is not the first destination they aim for."

In Trieste, the Italian city close to the Slovenian border, there are 4,000 migrants in shelters and another 2,500 living on the streets after making it through the Balkans, a migrant charity official said.

Belarus admits border help

Tom Parfitt Moscow
Maria Wilczek Warsaw

President Lukashenko of Belarus has admitted that it is "absolutely possible" his forces helped Middle Eastern migrants cross into Poland, but rejected suggestions that he invited them to his country to do so.

"We're Slavs. We have hearts. Our troops know the migrants are going to Germany," he told the BBC at the presidential palace in Minsk. He added: "Maybe someone helped them. I won't even look into this."

Western states have accused Lukashenko of encouraging and enabling thousands of migrants to travel to Belarus and then to the Polish border, where at least ten died camping in the woods.

His alleged motive was revenge for EU sanctions over his brutal handling

of opposition protests after last year's controversial presidential election. However, he has denied artificially creating the crisis.

"I told them I'm not going to detain migrants on the border, hold them at the border, and if they keep coming from now on I still won't stop them, because they're not coming to my country, they're going to yours," he said. "But I didn't invite them here ... I don't want them to go through Belarus."

Hundreds tried to cross the border illegally on Thursday night, Polish officials said yesterday, despite makeshift migrant camps being cleared that day.

Poland's border guards said there were two attempted crossings on the eastern border of the EU and Nato, one involving 500 migrants, some of whom threw rocks and tear-gas canisters. A total of 45 were arrested.

Britain pivots from partner to provocateur on migrants, Macron complains

Charles Bremner Paris

President Macron has accused Britain of "swinging between partnership and provocation" over the flow of Channel migrants.

Speaking in northern France, Macron said he understood how the presence of migrants was disturbing life in the region and vowed to crack down within weeks on their illegal camps.

Macron said there was a particular problem between London and Paris. "We have the British, who swing between partnership and provocation," he told *La Voix du Nord* newspaper. "We need to further strengthen collabora-

tion." He said: "If those who want to join Britain have family there, it must be part of family reunification. If they are smuggled, we have to break this system."

"We must take several actions: prevent the establishment of lasting camps, act to dismantle the smuggling networks and strengthen work with the countries of origin to prevent these flows."

France would use its turn in the rotating EU presidency to work for European reforms on border control and migration, he added.

The French leader has expressed frustration in recent months over what he sees as bad faith in London over a

range of issues including the Channel migrants, fishing rights and the application of the Northern Ireland protocol in the Brexit accord.

Gérald Darmanin, the interior minister, used much tougher language this week, saying France refused to be the "punchbag for British politics". The Channel migrant flow was a British problem, organised by mainly British-based people smugglers and involving people drawn to England by its excessively loose labour laws, Darmanin said. Darmanin added that he was not ready to "be lectured at" by Priti Patel, the home secretary.

On Thursday, Patel blamed the EU's

provocateur on migrants, Macron complains

open borders for creating a "mass migration crisis" in the Channel. She said that the Schengen agreement had left France "overwhelmed" with migrants trying to reach Britain.

"Let's not forget that the real problem on illegal migration flows is the EU has no border protections whatsoever — Schengen open borders," she said during a visit to Washington for talks with her US counterpart.

More than 24,500 migrants have crossed the Channel in small boats this year, almost triple the number last year.

Patel said that she had secured assurances from the French government that it would deploy more advanced

technology to monitor its northern coastline.

Darmanin told Patel that France was changing the law on data protection to allow them to operate drones and other aerial surveillance. It will also enable the French police to use automatic number-plate recognition to track vehicles unloading boats for migrants.

More than 1,000 migrants arrived in Britain on Tuesday, the second time in a week that crossings had passed that threshold. The migration crisis at Poland's border with Belarus and the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan will add to the pressure, ministers fear.

However, asked about relations with

France, Patel adopted a conciliatory tone. Instead, she focused on blaming the EU for failing to stop millions moving freely around the Continent since the Syrian civil war began almost a decade ago. She said that millions were on the move around the world due to conflict and climate change, many heading for Europe, and pointed out that seven in ten migrants who attempted to cross the Channel had entered France via Belgium.

Asked whether the £54 million she promised France to help to tackle the crisis in July had been good value, given that more than 12,000 have crossed the Channel since then, Patel said: "It's not

about value for money. There is a mass migration crisis."

Sir Keir Starmer has accused Patel of doing "absolutely nothing" to stem the flow of migrants. The Labour leader said that the home secretary had delivered a lot of "strong language" but had failed to stop tens of thousands arriving on beaches. He said that the government's decision to cut the foreign aid budget had made the situation in Calais worse. "We have not had strong enough agreements with France on this and we haven't done the work upstream," he told *Today* on BBC Radio 4. "You will never solve the immediate problem if you don't solve the upstream problem."