

France threatens retaliation against UK as fishing spat flares again



In this file photo taken on May 6, 2021 French fishing boats protest in front of the port of Saint Helier off the British island of Jersey against unfair restrictions on their ability to fish in UK waters after Brexit. (File photo by AFP)

Paris, October 1 (RHC)-- France has accused Britain of playing politics with post-Brexit fishing rights after London and the Channel Island of Jersey refused dozens of French fishing boats a license to operate in their territorial waters.

The disputes between the UK and France over post-Brexit fishing rights in the English Channel have flared again after the Jersey government, a self-governing British Crown dependency 14 miles (22 kilometers) off the French coast, rejected 75 license applications from French fishermen to operate in its waters.

French maritime minister Annick Girardin said France and the EU would work on possible responses over the next two weeks unless the UK was able to resolve the dispute quickly.

Paris is considering measures that would involve energy and trade, as well as rail service and British students living in France, Girardin said after a meeting with fishing representatives on Wednesday. She called on other European countries to show solidarity “because what France is going through today, some others will also go through it.” “French fishing should not be taken hostage by the British for political ends,” she added.

Within the Brexit trade and cooperation agreement struck there is an EU-UK fisheries agreement that offers French fishers to continue fishing in the 6-12 nautical mile zone from the UK’s shores up to 2026 if they can prove that they had previously been operating in those waters.

Jersey’s minister for external affairs, Ian Gorst, insisted that its government had taken a “pragmatic” approach in issuing 64 full licenses and 31 temporary licenses to French boats, on top of the 47 vessels already licensed earlier this year.

Gorst said that while some of the applicants may have previously had permits to fish in Jersey’s waters, the EU-UK trade agreement provided rights only to those who could prove that they had actually operated in those waters for at least 11 days over the previous three years.

The French government said 87 smaller fishing vessels had applied for permits, not 47 as London had said. Months earlier, the French threatened to cut off power supplies to Jersey, which gets 95% of its electricity from France if it did not relent to the country’s demands. At the time, dozens of French boats surrounded the island’s main port and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson famously sent naval patrol vessels into Channel waters.

The concern is that Jersey’s latest decision might lead to something similar occurring again. French government spokesman Gabriel Attal said the decisions were “totally unacceptable and inadmissible” and “contravene the agreement that was signed in the framework of Brexit,” threatening retaliation via Brussels.

“We are going to continue and step up our work with the (European) Commission to move forward on this issue, and also to study possible retaliation measures that could be taken if the agreement is not respected,” he added.

UK-French relations are already strained, with Paris accusing London of going behind its back to sign a new defense deal to provide US-built nuclear-powered submarines to Australia as part of a larger Southeast Asian defense agreement.

Australia abruptly canceled its 2016 contract to buy French submarines worth \$40 billion last week, and instead opted for US nuclear-powered submarines as part of the AUKUS alliance, with Washington and London.

However, its decision to tear up the contract with France in favor of American nuclear-powered vessels, sparked outrage in Paris, with President Emmanuel Macron recalling its ambassadors to the United States and Australia in an unprecedented display of outrage.

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