

UK threatens to send migrant boats back to France

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London, September 10 (RHC)-- The United Kingdom has approved plans to turn away boats carrying migrants and asylum seekers to its shores, deepening a rift with France over how to deal with a surge of

people risking their lives by trying to cross the English Channel in small dinghies.

Hundreds of small boats have attempted the journey from France to England this year, across one of the world's busiest shipping lanes. The summer surge happens every year, but is now larger than normal as alternative routes have been shut down.

Border officials will be trained to force boats away from British waters but will deploy the new tactic only when they deem it safe, a British government official who asked not to be named said on Thursday.

Michael Ellis, the UK's acting attorney general, will draw up a legal basis for border officials to deploy the new strategy, the official said. Home Secretary Priti Patel told French Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin that stopping people making their way from France on small boats was her "number one priority".

Patel had already irritated the French government earlier this week when she indicated the UK could withhold about 54 million pounds (\$75m) in funding it had pledged to help stem the flow of migrants and refugees.

Darmanin said the UK must honour both maritime law and commitments made to France, which include financial payments to help fund French maritime border patrols. "France will not accept any practice that goes against maritime law, nor financial blackmail," the French minister tweeted.

France has a policy of not intercepting or turning back boats unless they ask for help, and instead escorts them to British waters. That has stoked anger in Brexit-supporting sections of the British media and the government in London, who accuse France of shirking its responsibilities.

France for its part has said it would not make payment "conditional on numerical targets", warning that to do so would damage relations. "Such an approach would reflect a serious loss of confidence in our cooperation," a French interior ministry source said.

In a letter leaked to British media, Darmanin said forcing boats back towards the French coast would be dangerous and that "safeguarding human lives at sea takes priority over considerations of nationality, status and migratory policy."

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