

UK to task military with stopping migrant boat crossings

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PM Boris Johnson reported to be poised to put the Royal Navy in charge of English Channel operations in a move critics denounce as 'cruel and inhumane'

London, January 18 (RHC)-- The United Kingdom's Royal Navy will be put in charge of efforts to stop boats carrying migrants and refugees arriving on the country's shores via the English Channel under plans signed off by embattled Prime Minister Boris Johnson, according to UK media reports.

The Ministry of Defense is to take over command of the operation from the UK's Border Force agency within weeks, several British media outlets reported on Monday. Border Force sits within the UK's Home

Office department.

The ministry said officials were exploring “every avenue” to prevent more crossings following a surge in the number of people who reached the UK from France by boat last year. Many who made the journey did so in unsafe, overcrowded vessels and perilous conditions, with sometimes deadly consequences.

In November, at least 27 people died while attempting the crossing when their boat deflated and sank, marking the worst disaster on record involving migrants and refugees trying to cross the channel to the UK from France.

“Unacceptable numbers of people continue to make the dangerous Channel crossings and last November’s tragic deaths serve as the strongest reminder of the need to stop them,” a defence ministry spokesperson said in a statement sent to Al Jazeera via email.

At least 28,431 migrants and refugees made the crossing in 2021, according to figures compiled by the BBC, a more than three-fold increase on the figure for the year before.

But UK newspaper The Times, citing unnamed government sources, reported that officials were eager to ensure “vessels cannot land on UK shores illegally.” The paper also said plans were being drawn up to send asylum seekers to countries such as Ghana and Rwanda for processing and resettlement as part of a wider attempt to deter people from attempting the Channel crossing.

It described the proposals as one of a “series of populist announcements” being readied by Johnson as he faces mounting pressure to quit over a string of alleged lockdown-breaking parties involving him, his staff and other government officials during the coronavirus pandemic. Critics accused the prime minister of attempting to deflect attention from the furore about his future.

Yvette Cooper, shadow home secretary for the main opposition Labour Party, said Johnson was chasing “headlines to distract from the total mess he is in.” She said the government had failed to carry out the “serious, practical work with France that is needed to stop lives being lost and criminal gangs profiting from dangerous Channel crossings.” “Time and again they have gone for headlines rather than hard work to tackle this serious issue,” Cooper added.

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