# Starmer’s return hubs plan for failed asylum seekers faces diplomatic and political hurdles



Sir Keir Starmer's recent proposal to establish "return hubs" in third countries, such as Kosovo, for those whose asylum applications have been rejected in the UK has ignited a heated debate in the political arena. This initiative aims to relocate failed asylum seekers for processing and eventual deportation, ostensibly to serve as a deterrent to the significant rise in illegal Channel crossings. The plan has encountered sharp criticism from various factions, with shadow Home Secretary Chris Philp dismissing it as "laughable" amidst a backdrop of record-high migrant crossings.

Philp highlighted the staggering figures since Labour took power, noting that over 37,000 illegal migrants have crossed the Channel, with 2025 projected to be a record year for such crossings. He pointedly remarked on Prime Minister Edi Rama's rejection of the UK's proposal for return hubs in Albania during a recent visit. Rama's clear dismissal served to underline the obstacles faced by the Labour Party in operationalising such plans. As Philp argued, the proposal lacks the necessary framework to act as an effective deterrent, particularly since most individuals who enter the UK illegally ultimately have their asylum claims accepted.

Further complicating the situation is the fact that there have been no formal discussions between the UK and Kosovo regarding these return hubs, as President Vjosa Osmani stated. This absence of agreement raises questions about the feasibility of Starmer's plan. He maintains that discussions are ongoing with multiple countries to establish these hubs, framing them as a crucial innovation in tackling illegal migration and alleviating pressure on the UK's overstretched asylum system.

Simultaneously, Starmer has also unveiled broader ambitions for managing asylum and migration at the European level. His proposal includes seeking an EU-wide returns agreement, which would involve a "quid pro quo" framework where the UK accepts a quota of migrants from the EU in return for returning those who arrive illegally. In making this argument, he has termed people smuggling a security threat equivalent to terrorism, signalling a shift in how the Labour Party addresses these complex issues.

Yet, the party's approach has its critics, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which has expressed cautious support for the idea of return hubs. The UNHCR has outlined the potential benefits while stressing the need to safeguard human rights during such processes. This endorsement lends a level of credibility to Starmer's initiative but also underscores the pressing requirement for comprehensive agreements and monitoring systems to ensure that humanitarian standards are maintained.

Starmer's proposal arrives at a time when illegal entry into the UK is a critical issue, evident from the over 12,000 crossings recorded since January. Recent revelations indicate that the current government has intensified immigration enforcement, achieving a significant increase in the number of individuals returned since the last general election. In this environment, the Labour Party's immigration strategy appears to be a balancing act between addressing rising illegal immigration and maintaining compassionate asylum policies.

As the debate unfolds, the viability of Starmer's return hubs remains a contentious topic. Critics warn that without effective deterrents and thorough agreements with prospective host countries, the proposed strategy may fail to resolve the underlying challenges of illegal migration. The political landscape thus continues to evolve, reflecting the urgent need for innovative and sustainable solutions to one of the most pressing issues facing the UK today.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2060274/starmers-send-migrants-kosovo-illegal-crossings), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/sep/13/starmer-on-tour-solutions-migration-crisis)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2060274/starmers-send-migrants-kosovo-illegal-crossings), [[5]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c2q0rvgv25xo)
* Paragraph 3 – [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/sep/13/starmer-on-tour-solutions-migration-crisis), [[4]](https://www.gbnews.com/news/un-labour-unhcr-migrants-asylum-seekers-return-hubs)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2060274/starmers-send-migrants-kosovo-illegal-crossings), [[6]](https://www.forbes.com/sites/freylindsay/2025/03/23/uk-government-reportedly-considering-resurrecting-refugee-offshoring/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[3]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-announces-massive-surge-in-immigration-enforcement-as-returns-reach-24000-since-the-election), [[7]](https://news.sky.com/story/return-hubs-get-un-backing-in-boost-for-potential-plans-to-deport-failed-asylum-seekers-13351488)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2060274/starmers-send-migrants-kosovo-illegal-crossings> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/sep/13/starmer-on-tour-solutions-migration-crisis> - Labour leader Keir Starmer has revealed plans to seek an EU-wide returns agreement for asylum seekers arriving in Britain. The proposal involves a 'quid pro quo' deal, where the UK would accept quotas of migrants from the EU in exchange for sending back those who arrive illegally. Starmer emphasised the need to treat people smuggling as a security threat on par with terrorism, aiming to dismantle criminal gangs and secure British borders. He also criticised the Conservative government's approach to illegal immigration, calling it ineffective and focused on cheap headlines.
3. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-announces-massive-surge-in-immigration-enforcement-as-returns-reach-24000-since-the-election> - The UK government has returned over 24,000 individuals with no right to be in the UK since the General Election, marking the highest returns rate in eight years. Prime Minister Keir Starmer announced a 21% increase in enforced returns and a 16% increase in foreign national offenders being removed from the UK since July 5th. The surge in removals follows the government's immediate action to redeploy staff across the Home Office to work on policies that deliver results, aiming to restore order to the immigration system under the Plan for Change.
4. <https://www.gbnews.com/news/un-labour-unhcr-migrants-asylum-seekers-return-hubs> - The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has endorsed Labour's plan to deport rejected asylum seekers to 'return hubs'. Discussions are underway with countries including Albania, Serbia, Bosnia, and North Macedonia to establish these hubs. The UNHCR document outlines the need for effective return systems and the potential role of return hubs, suggesting the agency would be open to assisting countries like the UK in establishing these arrangements, provided they do not conflict with UNHCR’s mandate to safeguard refugee rights.
5. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c2q0rvgv25xo> - Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer has confirmed that the party would resume processing asylum applications for individuals who have previously arrived in the UK illegally. Under current laws, many such individuals are blocked from gaining refugee status. Starmer argued that the government's approach has proven to be the 'absolute opposite of a deterrent', and that 100% of those arriving in the country are staying for life at the taxpayer’s expense.
6. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/freylindsay/2025/03/23/uk-government-reportedly-considering-resurrecting-refugee-offshoring/> - The UK government under Prime Minister Keir Starmer is reportedly reconsidering the possibility of using countries in the Balkans as 'return hubs' to send rejected asylum seekers. This plan aligns with the trend among European policymakers to pursue 'offshoring' schemes. The proposal differs from the previous Rwanda scheme in that it involves sending individuals whose asylum claims have been rejected to these countries, rather than processing claims abroad. Critics argue that such schemes ignore the realities of irregular migration and asylum processes.
7. <https://news.sky.com/story/return-hubs-get-un-backing-in-boost-for-potential-plans-to-deport-failed-asylum-seekers-13351488> - The UN's refugee agency has endorsed the concept of 'return hubs', which would involve Britain sending failed asylum seekers to another country. Home Secretary Yvette Cooper met with the UN's High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, to discuss the idea. The UNHCR has set out how such hubs could work while meeting its legal standards, recommending monitoring to ensure human rights standards are reliably met. The country hosting the return hub would need to grant temporary legal status for migrants, and the country sending the failed asylum seekers would need to support it to ensure adequate accommodation and reception arrangements.