

COURTESY TRANSLATION

OF THE LETTER OF 6 SEPTEMBER 2021  
FROM M. GERALD DARMANIN,  
MINISTER OF THE INTERIOR,  
TO THE RT HON. PRITI PATEL,  
HOME SECRETARY

Dear Minister, [handwritten: Dear Priti,]

I read your letter of 12 August with interest. Our two countries are acting with the utmost determination to frustrate the efforts of people smugglers who, with the fine weather, and as we step up our action, are devising new means of operating.

Indeed, recent events in Afghanistan, as well as the improved way in which we are thwarting attempts by road, all increase pressure on the sea route.

The figures of the past few weeks are undoubtedly, as you point out, less satisfactory, but you will have noted that, since the beginning of the year, the rate at which small boat crossings are thwarted stands at 57.3%, i.e. a higher level than that recorded over the same period in 2020.

While there is an increase in the number of migrants landing in the UK, it is mainly due to a new strategy by people smugglers of using larger boats which can now hold up to 65 people, in place of the makeshift boats each carrying around 15 people between 2019 and 2020. These groups of migrants are made up of particularly vulnerable people (infants, young children and elderly or disabled people), which limits our means of action, in addition to the fact that the migrants' behaviour is increasingly violent.

Added to these well-known difficulties are new diversionary tactics which consist in launching a large number of small boats, known as "decoy boats", in order to overwhelm intervention capabilities and make it even trickier for our forces to intervene. And the tragedy of 11 August shows how extremely careful we must be when it comes to interceptions at sea.

The joint actions to which we subscribed in the joint declaration of 20 July will make it possible to build the modern, effective, "smart border" that we are calling for. We must pursue this strategy, which is effective, and I have noted the use of military-style detection technology you are proposing. I have asked for the prospective "technology" working group made up of our respective teams of experts to meet in the coming weeks to come up with practical, operational solutions.

All available intervention capabilities are permanently mobilized along the Channel coastline. However, as was discussed with Parliamentary Under Secretary of State Chris Philp when he came to Paris on 30 July, I must take into consideration the current security and migration constraints which France, moreover, continues to face.

Migration pressure at our internal borders has never been greater, even exceeding the levels experienced during the 2015-2016 migration crisis. The mobilization of our forces at our southern borders, as well as at the EU's borders through the Frontex Agency, must not weaken, when we know the risks of migratory movements which the crises in Afghanistan and Belarus are likely to generate. But despite all these constraints, I can confirm that we are going to double the number of personnel deployed on the Channel coast within the planned timeframe.

I have also taken note of your offer to make a British plane available to monitor the coastline. In accordance with our integrated border-management strategy, we have asked the Frontex agency to carry out this type of mission.

Coordination between our forces on the coastline is, according to the teams themselves, good and effective. It does not require new structures to be created, as you propose, through a single, joint command centre for the forces. The police and gendarmerie units there are not solely dedicated to monitoring the coastline and combating illegal cross-Channel migration. Their use is an integral part of the national domestic-security policy which it is the French authorities' sovereign responsibility to conduct. However, as we have agreed, it appears that we must step up the activity of the joint information and coordination centre in Coquelles by harnessing all the potential it offers in terms of exchanging operational information about attempted crossings.

Likewise, in the field of intelligence on the fight against networks, the creation of a large-scale joint intelligence unit or Vetted Intelligence Cell seems to me premature. We must give priority to facilitating the investigation work of the Operational Research Unit (URO) that we created in July 2020. The funds allocated to it this year as part of the new financial package will enable us to achieve the expected results. In this regard, I am still encouraging operational cooperation with our European neighbours who face the same migratory phenomena. The issue is indeed being taken into account in the framework of the technical exchanges that are now a regular fixture. As indicated to Chris Philp, we shall ensure that the URO is accommodated in better conditions.

On the matter of readmitting migrants who have taken small boats, France still gives priority to a European solution, a process in which I hope the UK will get involved in its relations with the institutions of the European Union and other European partners. The feasibility of a very small number of ad hoc bilateral transfers, to respond to targeted situations, will be studied at technical level before we progress further.

Finally, the French position on intervention at sea remains unchanged. Safeguarding human lives at sea takes priority over considerations of nationality, status and migratory policy, out of strict respect for the international maritime law governing search and rescue at sea. With regard to traffic and conditions for crossing the Channel, France has no other solution than to intervene most often on the basis of the provisions in international law governing search and rescue at sea (SAR). The use of maritime refoulements to French territorial waters would risk having a negative impact on our cooperation.

Finally, I wanted to thank you again, *chère* Priti, for your invitation to the meeting of G7 interior ministers in London on 7 and 8 September, and I confirm to you my participation. We shall discuss this matter bilaterally, and I know we shall find areas of understanding with a view to deepening our cooperation.

For your information, your office can contact M. Nicolas PillereL, diplomatic adviser in my office, at the following email address: [nicolas.pillereL@interieur.gouv.fr](mailto:nicolas.pillereL@interieur.gouv.fr).

(complimentary close, with handwritten addition)