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Government Targets Online Human Smuggling Ads with New Criminal Offence

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The UK government has announced a new crackdown on online adverts promoting illegal Channel crossings and fake travel documents, with offenders facing up to five years in prison under proposed legislation. The move is part of wider efforts to combat organised criminal gangs facilitating illegal immigration via social media platforms.

The new offence, which will be added to the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill currently progressing through Parliament, is intended to bolster police powers and disrupt the operations of people-smuggling networks. While it is already illegal to assist

unlawful immigration, ministers argue that existing laws do not go far enough in tackling the digital promotion of illegal routes into Britain.

Research cited by the Home Office suggests that approximately 80 percent of those arriving in the UK via small boats in recent years have relied on social media during their journey—often to connect with smugglers advertising their services openly online. According to the National Crime Agency (NCA), over 8,000 such posts were taken down in 2024 alone. Authorities have reported cases where smugglers used social media to share promotional videos featuring migrants, thanking them for assistance, though individual identities and locations were not always publicly disclosed.

Home Secretary Yvette Cooper condemned the criminal exploitation of vulnerable individuals. Speaking to *Sky News* on Saturday, she said: “These criminals have no issue with leading migrants to life-threatening situations using brazen tactics on social media. We are determined to do everything we can to stop them, wherever they operate.” Cooper also described the online sale of false hope as “immoral.”

The government also plans to introduce a fast-track asylum processing system to reduce the growing backlog of cases, with decisions expected to be delivered within weeks rather than months. The announcement follows Home Office figures showing over 25,000 illegal arrivals via small boats so far in 2025, a record number for this point in the year.

Prominent examples of online smuggling promotions include so-called “package deals” offered by Albanian criminal groups, reportedly costing around £12,000 and falsely promising accommodation and employment upon arrival in the UK, as reported by *Sky News*.

However, critics argue that the measures do not go far enough. Conservative MP and Shadow Home Secretary Chris Philp accused the government of weak enforcement. Speaking to *Sky News*, he said: “Labour still has no clear plan to deter illegal entry, no effective enforcement and no strategy to speed up removals. This is a panicked attempt to look tough after months of doing nothing.”

The government maintains that the new law will help sever the link between digital platforms and people-smuggling operations, although some experts warn that enforcement may be difficult without tighter cooperation from tech companies.

The bill is expected to face further scrutiny in Parliament in the coming weeks as the government seeks to reinforce Britain’s border security amid sustained public concern

over illegal migration.