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Dover Migrant Detentions Begin Under New France Deal

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The UK has carried out its first detentions of migrants under the new UK-France returns agreement, Prime Minister Keir Starmer confirmed on Wednesday. The individuals were intercepted in Dover, marking the launch of the “one in, one out” pilot scheme aimed at managing Channel crossings.

The deal was jointly announced in Paris last month by Starmer and French President Emmanuel Macron. It permits the UK to return migrants who arrive illegally by small boat, provided their asylum claims are ruled inadmissible. In return, the UK will accept one legal asylum applicant from France for each migrant returned under the new protocol.

Under the terms of the agreement, UK authorities must initiate a return request within three days of a migrant's arrival. French officials then have up to 14 days to respond. An online portal operated by the Home Office now allows eligible adults and families residing in France to formally express interest in resettlement to the UK through authorised channels.

In a statement posted to social media, the Prime Minister said, "We have detained the first illegal migrants under our new deal before returning them to France. No gimmicks, just results. If you break the law to enter this country, you will face being sent back."

Footage released by the Home Office showed individuals being processed at Dover's Western Jet Foil terminal before being transferred to the Manston processing centre. Medical evaluations were carried out before further detention in immigration removal facilities.

The scheme forms part of the Labour government's broader effort to address illegal migration and border control amid growing public discontent. Recent demonstrations have taken place across the country, including outside a hotel in London's Canary Wharf used to house asylum seekers. Several arrests were made during that protest on Sunday.

Home Secretary Yvette Cooper praised the implementation of the deal, describing it as a "groundbreaking treaty" and a signal to criminal gangs and migrants considering crossing. "This sends a clear message to anyone considering paying traffickers to reach the UK that they risk their lives and waste their money by taking a small boat," she said.

Despite the high-profile launch, questions have already been raised about the deal's legal framework. One specific clause states that no migrant can be returned to France if they have an "outstanding human rights claim" in the UK.

Critics argue this provision could become a loophole, as individuals may lodge late or unfounded human rights claims to delay deportation. Home Office officials responded by clarifying that only those with active claims in UK courts would be temporarily exempt from removal. Migrants who have not yet made a claim may be returned to France, where any

future legal action would be handled by French authorities. In cases where UK-based legal proceedings have already concluded, removals may still proceed.

The Labour government has made reducing small boat arrivals a key pledge. However, figures suggest the issue remains far from resolved. More than 25,000 migrants have crossed the Channel so far this year, setting a new record for this point in the year since records began in 2018. The backlog of asylum claims now exceeds 75,000, adding further pressure on the government to show progress on border enforcement.

The UK-France returns deal is expected to remain under scrutiny in the weeks ahead, both in Parliament and among the general public, as immigration continues to be a defining issue in national political debate.