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The UK's House of Lords has passed the Safety of Rwanda Bill to counter a challenge raised by the Supreme Court, against a controversial deportation policy. What was the policy and why was it criticised? We explain.

By: **Explained Desk**

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Britain's Prime Minister Rishi Sunak (right) and the President of Rwanda Paul Kagame inside 10, Downing Street in London, Britain April 9, 2024. (Alberto Pezzali/Pool via REUTERS/File Photo)

The United Kingdom's upper house of parliament passed a Bill on Monday (April 22), as part of the government's plan for deporting undocumented immigrants to the East African nation of Rwanda.

UK Prime Minister [Rishi Sunak](#) has often emphasised the need for stopping the inflow of small boats coming to the country, carrying migrants who are attempting to escape violence, persecution and instability in a range of countries.

However, the plan for sending migrants to Rwanda has been divisive, with the UK Supreme Court ruling that the policy was illegal in November 2023. We explain the recent development, what has led up to it, and what may happen now.

What is the Rwanda Bill and why was it passed?

The House of Lords, [which is the upper house of parliament](#), passed the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill. It essentially says that Rwanda is a safe

third country for the purposes of removing its individuals to Rwanda.

According to the government's factsheet, the Bill was introduced in order to respond "to the Supreme Court's concerns and will allow Parliament to confirm status of the Republic of Rwanda as a safe third country".

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In its ruling last year, Supreme Court President Robert Reed said that Rwanda couldn't be relied upon to not mistreat asylum-seekers. Citing Rwanda's abysmal human rights record, including enforced disappearances and torture, Reed said that Rwanda practiced "refoulement," or the practice of sending migrants back to their unsafe home countries.

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The court held there was a risk of asylum seekers being subjected to the same threats and safety concerns they have attempted to flee.

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In response to this argument, the Safety of Rwanda Bill was passed after the UK government signed a new treaty with Rwanda to "beef up protections for migrants" in December 2023, the *Associated Press* reported. Declaring Rwanda to be a safe country, the Bill is an attempt to ensure the policy stays.

What exactly is the UK government's policy on Rwanda?

In April 2022, then-UK PM Boris Johnson signed a deal with the Rwandan government on allowing the UK to send some asylum-seekers to Rwanda. Johnson had hailed this move as one that would “save countless lives” from human trafficking, given the dangerous circumstances in which they attempt to enter the UK.

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Under the scheme, people arriving in Britain as undocumented stowaways in trucks or boats would be flown 6,400 km to Rwanda. Once there, they would be assessed for eventual resettlement there. The timeline for being deported to Rwanda could be as short as a couple of weeks, the government had announced.

The UK government paid its Rwandan counterpart million of pounds for housing and integrating the migrants as part of the pilot scheme, which was to initially last for five years. The process of integration would theoretically also involve supporting the migrants with access to training, healthcare, and shelter so they could resettle.

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It has been estimated that the UK government has paid its Rwandan counterpart £290 million so far, even before the plan is yet to come into action amid legal challenges and criticisms. Earlier this week, The Guardian reported that the government would pay another £50 million if its Bill was passed.

Why has the UK's Rwanda plan been criticised?

Highlighting the dangers of transferring refugees and asylum seekers to third countries without sufficient safeguards, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) had said they must “not be traded like commodities and transferred abroad for processing.”

“UNHCR remains firmly opposed to arrangements that seek to transfer refugees and asylum-seekers to third countries in the absence of sufficient safeguards and standards. Such arrangements simply shift asylum responsibilities, evade international obligations, and are contrary to the letter and spirit of the Refugee Convention,” UNHCR’s Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, Gillian T Triggs said in a statement.

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In 2022, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) stopped the first plane from departing the UK for Rwanda. Its ruling also barred the UK from removing migrants through such a scheme until the completion of the legal battle against it in Britain.

With general elections due to be held in the UK either this year or in early 2025, immigration also matters as a major political issue. The opposition Labour Party’s senior leader Yvette Cooper wrote in a recent opinion article in *The Telegraph* that the Rwanda plan was costly and it did not focus on most of the immigrants coming in. However, she did not mention the controversial decision to deport people to Rwanda in the first place, or its safety.

What has the government planned now?

As the *AP* reported, “The debate in Britain comes as countries throughout Western Europe and North America look for ways to slow the rising number of migrants as war, climate change and political oppression force people from their homes.”

In the UK, “The number of migrants arriving in Britain on small boats soared to 45,774 in 2022 from just 299 four years earlier as people seeking refuge pay criminal gangs thousands of pounds (dollars) to ferry them across the channel.” However, the numbers have dropped of late.

Rishi Sunak has now said the first flights to Rwanda would take off in 10-12 weeks, despite the possibility of an ECHR challenge. “We are ready, plans are in place, and these flights will go come what may,” he said.