

Royal College of Nursing (RCN) Briefing on the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill 2023-24

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) is the largest professional body and trade union for nursing staff in the world. We represent over half a million members who are registered nurses, midwives, students, and nursing support workers across the United Kingdom and beyond.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill 2023-24 was introduced on 7 December 2023 and represents a significant and backwards step in the UK Government's approach to asylum processing and human rights protections more generally.
- 1.2 The RCN's view is that the very essence of the Bill is fundamentally at odds with the human rights of people seeking asylum. It is imperative that the Bill is scrapped in its entirety, as amendments alone would be futile.

2. Key areas of concern

Human rights

- 2.1 Clause 3 of the Bill seeks to remove human rights protections for those seeking asylum in the UK by disapplying sections of the Human Rights Act, whilst clause 5 would downgrade case law from the European Court of Human Rights and empower ministers to ignore 'interim measures' that delay removal. By offshoring asylum processing to Rwanda, the policy also weakens the international solidarity that underpins the global system of refugee protection.¹
- 2.2 On arrival in Rwanda, a lack of legal representation and a judiciary that lacks independence pose the threat of additional human rights violations and a continued risk of refoulement, despite the latest UK-Rwanda treaty. UNHCR have documented recent cases of expulsion from Rwanda that could have led to refoulement.² Asylum processing figures in Rwanda are also cause for alarm. For example, citizens of Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen all had a 0% success rate in claims processed by Rwanda from 2020 to 2022. By comparison, the success rate for claims from these countries processed in the UK between 2021 and 2023 all exceeded 98%.^{3,4}

Health implications

- 2.3 The RCN is gravely concerned that the policy will have damaging physical and mental health impacts for those threatened with removal to Rwanda. Of 36 individuals selected for removal to Rwanda in 2022 and assessed by Medical Justice clinicians, 26 displayed indicators of torture, 15 displayed symptoms or were diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and 11 reported experiencing suicidal thoughts while in detention.⁵ The World Health Organisation (WHO) has found that immigration detention can have a severe impact on mental health⁶ and the looming threat of deportation will likely cause significant psychological harm.

- 2.4 The WHO identifies Rwanda as one of 55 countries facing the most pressing universal health coverage related workforce shortages.⁷ According to the most recent World Bank data, Rwanda has just 0.9 nurses and midwives per 1,000 people. This is less than the average for low-income countries and 10 times less than the 9.2 nurses and midwives per 1,000 people in the UK.⁸ Given the severity of workforce shortages, there is a risk that highly vulnerable and often traumatised patients will be unable to access the specialised care they require.
- 2.5 The RCN is concerned that the Bill would lead to an expansion in the use of detention and large-scale accommodation centres and their potential overcrowding. Detention facilities can pose a significant threat to detainees' health due to failures in infection control as evidenced by outbreaks of diphtheria within the Manston processing centre. MSF UK have recently also raised concerns regarding the mental wellbeing of those held at the Wethersfield Barracks.⁹
- 2.6 The RCN has previously raised concerns regarding the role of nurses in undertaking invasive and scientifically disputed age assessments. Age assessments are usually performed using ionising radiation that can harm patients without providing any medical benefit, potentially placing registered nurses at odds with their professional requirements under the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) Code. The RCN cannot be confident that unaccompanied children seeking asylum in the UK would be correctly identified as children and therefore protected from removal to Rwanda.¹⁰

3. Suggested questions to ask the Minister

- What assessment has the government undertaken on access to health, including mental health, care and treatment within current and future domestic detention facilities?
- What evidence does the Minister have on the effectiveness and scientific justification for the use of medical age assessments?
- What assurances has the government had from the Rwandan government on access to health, including mental health, care and treatment for people in the asylum system in Rwanda?

¹ [UNHCR Analysis of the Legality and Appropriateness of the Transfer of Asylum-Seekers under the UK-Rwanda arrangement: an update | UNHCR UK](#)

² [Q&A: The UK's policy to send asylum seekers to Rwanda - Migration Observatory - The Migration Observatory \(ox.ac.uk\)](#)

³ [How many people do we grant protection to? - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

⁴ [Immigration system statistics data tables - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

⁵ [Who's Paying The Price? - Medical Justice 2022](#)

⁶ [Who's Paying The Price? - Medical Justice 2022](#)

⁷ [WHO health workforce support and safeguards list 2023](#)

⁸ [Nurses and midwives \(per 1,000 people\) - Rwanda | Data \(worldbank.org\)](#)

⁹ [MSF launches UK operations to treat people seeking asylum](#)

¹⁰ [Royal College of Nursing \(RCN\) Parliamentary Briefing: Illegal Migration Bill | Royal College of Nursing](#)