UK govt seeks to overturn ban on housing migrants in hotel

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The UK government on Thursday called for a court-ordered ban on housing asylum seekers at a protest-hit hotel to be lifted, warning the move risked setting “a precedent”.  
  
At a Court of Appeals hearing, the interior ministry sought to overturn a High Court injunction issued earlier this month giving authorities until September 12 to remove the migrants.  
  
The ruling dealt Prime Minister Keir Starmer’s Labour government a political and logistical blow, with some 32,345 asylum seekers already housed temporarily in UK hotels at the end of March.  
  
Flashpoint protests broke out at the Bell Hotel in Epping, northeast London, in July after an asylum seeker staying there was accused of sexual assault of a 14-year-old girl.  
  
Ethiopian Hadush Gerberslasie Kebatu has denied charges including sexual assault, attempted sexual assault, and harassment without violence.  
  
The protests, some of which turned violent, spread to other parts of the country, and spurred Epping Forest district council into legal action against the ministry, arguing the hotel had become a risk to public safety and breached planning laws.  
  
Other councils vowed to take similar action, posing a potential problem for the government which under a 1999 law is legally required to house “all destitute asylum seekers whilst their asylum claims are being decided”.  
  
The Bell Hotel’s owner Somani Hotels and the Home Office argued the site had been used to house migrants previously from 2020-2021 and 2022-2024, and said the Epping protests were not about planning issues.  
  
Government official Becca Jones told the court the loss of 152 spaces at the Bell Hotel would be “significant” for the pool of available rooms.  
  
“Granting the interim injunction … risks setting a precedent which would have a serious impact on the Secretary of State’s ability to house vulnerable people,” said Jones.  
  
The Home Office official warned the injunction would encourage local authorities looking to block such housing, as well as “those who seek to target asylum accommodation in acts of public disorder.”  
  
The three senior Appeal court judges hearing the case said they would make their ruling on the issue at 2:00 pm (1300 GMT) on Friday.  
  
Anti-immigration firebrand Nigel Farage has already indicated councils run by his upstart Reform UK party would pursue similar legal moves.  
  
More than 50,000 migrants have made the dangerous crossing from northern France in small boats since Starmer became UK leader in July 2024, fuelling frustration among far-right politicians and the public.  
  
Labour has pledged to end the use of hotels for asylum seekers before the next election, likely in 2029, in a bid to save billions of pounds.