Migrant crossings to UK hit new record, heaping pressure on Sunak

More than 4,600 asylum seekers have arrived in Britain on small boats so far in 2024, a record total for the first three months of the year and giving Prime Minister Rishi Sunak a fresh political headache.

Provisional data from the Home Office, or interior ministry, showed on Wednesday (27 March) that 4,644 people had been detected arriving across the Channel on small boats such as inflatable dinghies up to 26 March this year.

That compares with 3,770 for the same period last year and 4,162 for 2022, the previous record high.

Sunak is hoping his flagship scheme to deport those arriving in Britain without permission to Rwanda will deter people from making the dangerous cross-Channel crossings. Legislation which aims to get that plan up and running after a series of legal setbacks is due back in parliament next month.

“The unacceptable number of people who continue to cross the Channel demonstrates exactly why we must get flights to Rwanda off the ground as soon as possible,” a Home Office spokesperson said last week.

“We continue to work closely with French police who are facing increasing violence and disruption on their beaches as they work tirelessly to prevent these dangerous, illegal and unnecessary journeys.”

Overall annual numbers fell 36% last year from 2022’s record total, which led to Sunak claiming the government was beginning to have success in “stopping the boats”, one of his key priorities ahead of an election expected later this year.

But the latest increase will add to pressure on Sunak, whose Conservatives are well behind the opposition Labour Party in opinion polls with immigration a major concern for some voters.

“Despite all the evidence to the contrary, Rishi Sunak keeps on telling the British people that small boat arrivals are coming down and his promise to stop the boats remains on track,” said Stephen Kinnock, Labour’s immigration spokesperson.