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Anglican Archbishop Justin Welby of Canterbury, England, attends the General Synod 2023 in

Anglican Archbishop Justin Welby of Canterbury, England, attends the General Synod 2023 in London Feb. 9. (OSV New/Toby Melville, Reuters)

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The head of the Church of England on May 10 condemned a British government bill that would dramatically curb migrants' ability to seek asylum in the U.K., calling the policy "isolationist, morally unacceptable and politically impractical."

Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby made a rare intervention in Parliament to oppose the legislation. He told the House of Lords, Parliament's unelected upper chamber, that the government's proposal was a "short-term fix" that risked causing great damage to the U.K.'s reputation.

The legislation bars asylum claims by anyone who reaches the U.K. by unauthorized means, and compels officials to detain and then deport refugees and migrants "to their home country or a safe third country," such as Rwanda. Once deported, they would be banned from ever re-entering the U.K.

Britain's Conservative government says the measure would deter tens of thousands of people from trying to cross the English Channel in small boats each year in hopes of reaching the U.K. But critics, including the United Nations' refugee agency, have

described the legislation as unethical and unworkable, and some allege it would violate international law.

The bill passed the House of Commons last month. It was on a second reading on May 10 in the House of Lords, where it faces strong opposition. The Lords can amend the legislation but not block it.

Welby, who is also the spiritual head of Anglican churches worldwide and presided over King Charles III's coronation on May 6, said international protections for refugees were "not inconvenient obstructions to get 'round by any legislative means necessary."

He added that it was wrong for the U.K. to leave the responsibility of accommodating refugees up to other countries, often much poorer ones.

"Of course we cannot take everyone and nor should we, but this bill has no sense at all of the long-term and the global nature of the challenge that the world faces," Welby said. "This nation should lead internationally, not stand apart."

Britain's government has urged the House of Lords to back the bill, which it says "is designed to meet the will of the British people."

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has pledged to "stop the boats" carrying asylum-seekers across the English Channel and made that one of the key focuses of his time in office. His government has argued that the bill will clamp down on criminals who exploit desperate asylum-seekers and prevent migrants from dying during dangerous voyages from northern France in small dinghies.

"There is nothing compassionate about allowing vulnerable people to perish in the Channel," Sunak's spokesman, Max Blain, said. The government will "robustly defend" its migration bill, he added.

While Britain takes in fewer migrants than other European countries such as Germany and Italy, the number of people crossing the busy waterway in search of better lives in the U.K. has increased significantly in recent years.

More than 45,000 people, including many fleeing countries such as Afghanistan, Iran and Syria, arrived in Britain in small boats last year, up from 8,500 in 2020.

The government has housed many of those awaiting asylum decisions in hotels, which officials say costs taxpayers millions of pounds (dollars) a day. Authorities have said they plan to place new arrivals in disused military camps and a barge docked on the southern English coast.

Welby has been outspoken about his opposition to the Conservative government's efforts to curb migration. Last year, he warned against official rhetoric that portrayed migrants as "invaders." He also called a government plan to send some asylum-seekers to Rwanda "the opposite of the nature of God."

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