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## Migration

# UN human rights chief denounces Sun over Katie Hopkins 'cockroach' column

High commissioner launches scathing attack on tabloid columnist, comparing Hopkins' migrant remarks with hate language used before Rwandan genocide



Katie Hopkins has come under renewed fire for her controversial views about migrants after the UN high commissioner for human rights delivered a withering critique. Photograph: Ian West/PA

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The UN's human rights chief has attacked the Sun newspaper for publishing an article by [columnist Katie Hopkins](#), branding her use of the word “cockroaches” to describe migrants as reminiscent of anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda.

In a scathing and extraordinary intervention, [the UN high commissioner for human rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein](#), points out that the word “cockroaches” was used by both the Nazis and those behind the genocide in Rwanda, and urges the UK government, media and regulators to respect national and international laws on curbing incitement to hatred.

“The Nazi media described people their masters wanted to eliminate as rats and cockroaches,” said Zeid.

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“This type of language is clearly inflammatory and unacceptable, especially in a national newspaper. The Sun's editors took an editorial decision to publish this article, and – if it is found in breach of the law – should be held responsible along with the author.”

But such language, he added, was typical of “decades of sustained and unrestrained anti-foreigner abuse, misinformation and distortion” when it came to the reporting of migrant and refugee issues in the British media.

On 17 April, Hopkins – a columnist for the Sun, Britain's biggest-selling newspaper – wrote that she was resolutely unmoved by the plight of those risking their lives by crossing the Mediterranean.

Hopkins, a former contestant on the BBC1 show *The Apprentice*, and perennial courter of controversy, wrote: “No, I don't care. Show me pictures of coffins, show me bodies floating in water, play violins and show me skinny people looking sad. I still don't care.”

Hopkins added: “Make no mistake, these migrants are like cockroaches. They might look a bit ‘Bob Geldof's Ethiopia circa 1984’, but they are built to survive a nuclear bomb. They are survivors.”

The column appeared hours before [a fishing vessel packed with migrants capsized off the coast of Libya, with the loss of 800 lives](#).

A spokesperson for the UK industry regulator, the Independent Press Standards Organisation, said: “We can confirm that there have been more than 300 complaints about the article. IPSO is investigating whether the piece breaches the Editors' Code and will publish its findings in due course. While this process continues, it would not be right to provide a detailed response on the investigation or the broader issues it raises.”

Katie Hopkins airs her views on Mediterranean migrants during an LBC radio show on Monday

Zeid said Hopkins' column was far from an isolated incident, accusing the British tabloid press of consistently attacking and vilifying migrants.

"This vicious verbal assault on migrants and asylum seekers in the UK tabloid press has continued unchallenged under the law for far too long," he said.

"I am an unswerving advocate of freedom of expression, which is guaranteed under Article 19 of the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR), but it is not absolute. Article 20 of the same covenant says: 'Any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law.'"

The commissioner also accused the Daily Express of seeking to whip up anti-foreigner prejudice.

"To give just one glimpse of the scale of the problem, back in 2003 the Daily Express ran 22 negative front pages stories about asylum seekers and refugees in a single 31-day period," he said.

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"Asylum seekers and migrants have, day after day, for years on end, been linked to rape, murder, diseases such as HIV and TB, theft, and almost every conceivable crime and misdemeanour imaginable in front-page articles and two-page spreads, in cartoons, editorials, even on the sports pages of almost all the UK's national tabloid newspapers."

But many of the stories, said Zeid, had been "grossly distorted" or subsequently revealed to be "outright fabrications".

Although he conceded that "a similar process of demonisation" was taking place elsewhere in Europe, he said it was "usually led by extremist political parties or demagogues rather than extremist media".

Zeid said that all European countries needed to crack down on racism and xenophobia, which, "under the guise of freedom of expression, are being allowed to feed a vicious cycle of vilification, intolerance and politicisation of migrants, as well as of marginalised European minorities such as the Roma".

He also highlighted the fact that both the ICCPR and elements of the [International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination](#) – both of which have been ratified by the UK and other European countries – had sprung from a desire to avoid a repetition of the Holocaust.

"History has shown us time and again the dangers of demonising foreigners and minorities, and it is extraordinary and deeply shameful to see these types of tactics being used in a variety of countries, simply because racism and xenophobia are so easy to arouse in order to win votes or sell newspapers," he said.

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While there was a valid public debate to be had on migration and refugee issues, he said, the discussions had to be based on facts rather than “fiction or blatant xenophobia”.

Zeid added that twisted and prejudiced reporting was sapping compassion for those fleeing conflict, human rights abuses and economic deprivation, as well as those now drowning in the Mediterranean.

He said the “nasty underbelly of racism” now characterising the migration debate in more and more European countries was even skewing the EU response to the crisis.

[Thursday's emergency meeting of European leaders](#), he added, had focused “on deterrence and on preventing movement at all costs, [which] risks making the crisis even worse, and could sadly result in further massive loss of life”.

Zeid is the second senior UN official to criticise Hopkins. On Wednesday, [François Crépeau, the UN special rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, said people such as the columnist were helping to win votes by “migrant-bashing”](#).

Crépeau said politicians needed to show proper leadership: “We need people who are able to say to that Sun journalist, ‘You’re wrong and you should know that.’”

Hopkins used her column in the newspaper on Friday to address her previous remarks, describing the outcry the piece provoked as a “cautionary tale”.

She wrote: “I am reminded of the power of the pen. One should be brave enough to speak out - but aware of the dangers which lurk in the depths of our vocabulary.

“No one wants to see images of children drowned at sea, no matter what their journey or their destination. The next time you are thinking of clicking on a petition, don’t be angry about words.

“Accept our opinions differ. Channel your outrage at the regimes causing people to flee. And be part of the solution.”

A Sun spokesman said neither Hopkins nor the paper would be commenting further.

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