

The Australian

300 Sri Lankan asylum-seekers on the way to Australia

- Paul Maley
- From: **The Australian**
- June 09, 2010 12:00AM

A PEOPLE-SMUGGLING vessel carrying up to 300 Sri Lankan asylum-seekers, and organised by remnants of the Tamil Tigers, could be on its way to Australia.

Prominent counter-terrorism expert and author Rohan Gunaratna said the venture was being organised by the same Tiger faction responsible for transporting 76 Tamils to Canada on the Ocean Lady last year.

He said the boat, called the MV Sun Sea, was believed to be moored somewhere off the Thai-Vietnamese coast.

"The ship is part of a multinational investigation," Professor Gunaratna told The Australian.

"The venture came to light because of the investigation into Princess Easary or Ocean Lady because it's the same people who are doing the human-smuggling."

Professor Gunaratna's remarks are consistent with an alert issued by the Philippines Coast Guard on May 19.

"A suspected people-smuggling vessel, MV Sun Sea, a general cargo ship, previously known as Harin Panich 19, was last reported to be off Thailand waters at latitude 7 degrees 19 minutes north, longitude 100 degrees 58 minutes east on May 17 2010 . . . no new update was reported on the current location of subject vessel," the alert reads. "In this connection, all ships/watercrafts transiting near the area are advised to be on the lookout for the said vessel and report same to the Philippine Coast Guard."

The Philippines Star also reported late last month that the Thai navy had requested help locating the Sun Sea.

Professor Gunaratna said about 200 Sri Lankans were thought to be on the Sun Sea, which had a capacity of about 300. Only the organisers and the crew are suspected of Tamil Tiger connections.

Reports of the mysterious ship have been reverberating throughout the Sri Lankan community. If it does arrive with a full passenger load, it will be the largest vessel to be intercepted as part of the present wave of asylum boats.

In the past week, The Australian has spoken to a number of sources, including from within the Sri Lankan government, who speak of a large-scale people-smuggling operation suspected to be under way off the Thai-Vietnamese coast.

A spokeswoman for Home Affairs Minister Brendan O'Connor declined to discuss the reports, citing operational reasons.

However, The Australian has confirmed the federal government is aware of the possible operation.

One Australian government source cautioned that it was not uncommon to hear reports of ventures that never materialise.

It is understood the boat has been moored for about a month off Thailand.

It is not clear if the crew plan to sail the boat to Canada or Australia, but it is understood Australia had recently emerged as the favoured destination.

Professor Gunaratna said mechanical concerns meant the boat was more likely to travel to Australia.

Reports of the boat came as Border Protection Command intercepted a boat carrying 35 passengers and two crew southwest of Scott Reef yesterday.

Copyright 2010 News Limited. All times AEST (GMT +10).