

# The Australian

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## Agents 'promise Tamils boats to Australia'

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### **INDIAN police arrest alleged asylum-seekers and people-smugglers.**

AS a Sri Lankan Tamil asylum-seeker who was on a boat originally bound for Australia was charged in Canada with war crimes yesterday, reports from India said agents attempting to send more Sri Lankan Tamils to Australia on boats had been arrested.

Three agents are being questioned by Indian police in Velankanni, Tamil Nadu, on suspicion of people-smuggling, The Hindu reported. They are thought to have promised Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in South India safe passage to Australia for 100,000 Indian rupees (\$2241.36) each.

Fourteen Tamils living in refugee camps in India were also under arrest, thought to have gathered in Velankanni for passage to Australia as alleged asylum-seekers.

The arrests were a result of a police sting involving surveillance of refugee camps in the region.

Nagipattinam police told The Australian the arrested people were likely to be sent back to Sri Lanka. A spokesman said it was the first case in recent times of asylum-seekers leaving from South India for Australia. He could not say whether it indicated a new route had opened up.

The man arrested in Canada for war crimes yesterday was one of the 492 Sri Lankan Tamils who were smuggled into Vancouver in August on a ship from Thailand, the MV Sun Sea, which had originally been sailing for Australia, according to news reports in Canadian and Indian media.

Each Tamil reportedly paid up to \$50,000 to the Sun Sea owners.

The Australian reported in July that the Sun Sea, believed to be owned by the extremist Tamil Tiger guerilla organisation, had switched destination from Australia to Canada after the boat's organisers had decided they would get a friendlier reception in that country.

Counter-terrorism expert Rohan Gunaratna told the paper that Australia and Canada were rated by the Tigers as "the two softest countries".

The Sun Sea is said to be linked to the vessel Ocean Lady, a former gun-running ship for the Tamil Tigers that sailed 76 alleged Sri Lankan asylum-seekers to Vancouver a year ago.

A spokesman for Canadian Public Safety Minister Vic Toews told media yesterday: "What I can tell you is that our government will not sit back while Canada becomes a target for criminal operations that are trying to take advantage of Canada's generosity."

Outraged by the illegal arrival of so many Sri Lankan Tamils into the country, the Canadian government has just introduced a bill to curb people-smuggling, with severe penalties for smugglers, long detentions and deportations of such people.

Under the new law, those smuggled into the country will be detained up to one year to determine their true identity, and not allowed to live freely in Canada, as is the case now.

The new law will ensure quick prosecution and tougher jail terms for people-smugglers.

Canada has about 80,000 asylum cases pending before its refugee board.

Each refugee costs the country about \$30,000 annually. According to Canada's Attorney-General, Rob Nicholson, 63,000 refugees ordered to be deported are still in the country and 41,000 have gone missing.

*Additional reporting: agencies*

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