

The Australian

Authorities on alert for influx of Tamil Tiger asylum-seekers

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AUTHORITIES are on alert for a complex people-smuggling venture.

It is believed to be organised by former members of the Tamil Tigers trying to transport Sri Lankan asylum-seekers to Canada and possibly Australia.

A senior Australian government source told The Australian authorities were concerned that the same smugglers who in August sailed a massive people-smuggling ship, the MV Sun Sea, to Canada, were readying a second voyage.

The news came as Thai government sources confirmed they were on the lookout for a boat believed to be carrying about 15 ex-members of the Tamil Tigers that had sailed from India.

The boat is understood to be a wooden vessel unable to cross the Pacific to Canada.

The Thai government source said the people-smuggler responsible for the venture was known as "Bala". "We have been informed from a source outside Thailand that there is potentially another ship coming in from India and the destination is both Canada and Australia," the source told The Australian.

"They will drop people who wish to go to Canada to get on another boat in Thailand . . . the boat itself is intended for Australia."

The source said the information about the boat had not been fully confirmed.

Australian government sources partially corroborated the account, saying there were concerns the organisers of the Sun Sea were preparing a second boat.

"Its been believed for some time that it's possible the same group of people who were involved in the (Sun Sea), may be looking at a second one," the source said. "But I had not heard of any possibility of it disembarking passengers for here."

On August 12, Canadian officials boarded the Sun Sea, which sailed to British Columbia carrying 492 Tamil asylum-seekers.

While the vast majority of the boat's passengers are believed to pose no security threat, there are concerns organisers of the Sun Sea may have links to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam, or LTTE. Since its defeat in May last year, there have been fears within security circles that the LTTE has moved into people-smuggling.

And there is evidence smugglers are operating further afield in order to beat a concerted crackdown by Australian and Sri Lankan authorities.

The Australian has been told some of the boats that have arrived in Australia have sailed from India.

Security specialist and expert on the LTTE Rohan Gunaratna said India was a hub of activity for ex-members of the LTTE. "There are about 150 former members of the LTTE who are currently based in India, because there are various extremists groups in Tamil Nadu," Professor Gunaratna said. "But the Indian government is now starting to crack down so they are starting to flee."

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