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Canada helps track mystery ship with possible terrorist links

By Colin Freeze
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Sun Sea, which may be carrying potential refugee claimants linked to Tamil Tigers, may be headed for Australia

A South Asian refugee ship that Canadian authorities have secretly tracked for months on suspicion of links to terrorism appears to be bound for Australia.

The federal scrutiny of the ship, known as the Sun Sea, is a rare example of Canada's "pushing-borders-out strategy," a tactic that is meant to prevent a repeat of a massive asylum claim that occurred last fall, sources say.

Last October, 77 Tamil asylum seekers from Sri Lanka arrived on the shores of British Columbia in a vessel alleged to have been controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. After being jailed for several weeks in Canada, the claimants were freed pending hearings.

They are still waiting, a process that could take years. In the interim, federal agents dispatched to foreign shores have been on the lookout for a sister ship run by the same alleged Tamil Tigers smuggling operation reputed to have up to 300 refugees aboard.

This is the Sun Sea, also known as the Harin Panich 19 (HP19), and details about its journey are murky. What is known is that Canadian police and spies have formed partnerships with counterparts in Australia and Southeast Asia to watch out for the ship, now believed to be in the Gulf of Thailand.

The original fear was that the vessel could be bound for Canada, with Tamil asylum seekers looking to take advantage of the country's refugee system.

As things stand, there are few more hospitable places in the world.

Sri Lanka has been cracking down on the Tamil Tigers and their sympathizers since a bloody 30-year civil war ended last year. This has prompted an exodus of refugee ships that led the government of Australia - the nearest Western democracy - to seek a ban on future Tamil asylum claims.

Several weeks ago, The Globe began investigating reports about the Sun Sea and its voyage.

On May 19, the Philippine coast guard circulated a general public warning for local agents to be on the lookout for the Sun Sea.

On Wednesday, the Australian newspaper reported "300 asylum seekers on the way [<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/nation/asylum-seekers-on-the-way/story-e6frg6nf-1225877213077>]."

Canadian officials speak guardedly about their role in the investigation.

"The government of Canada's strategic approach with respect to migrant vessels includes efforts abroad that involve stopping illegal migrant-smuggling ships that are destined for Canada at their points of departure," Lisa Monette, a spokeswoman for the Department of Foreign Affairs, told The Globe last month.

"We will not comment on any specific operational matters."

However, one academic in Southeast Asia is publicly lauding Canada's work in the ongoing investigation.

"The Canadian intelligence response has been very decisive," Rohan Gunaratna, an international-terrorism expert based in Singapore, told The Globe last month.

Having testified in Canada as a government witness against the passengers who arrived on the earlier vessel, Mr. Gunaratna called the Sun Sea probe a sensitive and ongoing matter.

Last October, Canadian soldiers and police seized a ship off the coast of British Columbia and brought it ashore. Intelligence reports suggested it was running guns for the Tamil Tigers.

After that ship - known as the Princess Easwary, or the Ocean Lady - was escorted ashore, all 76 passengers and crew claimed refugee status.

Authorities fear that Tamil Tiger guerrillas may be among the passengers, but once even militants arrive, there might be no turning them back. "The reality is that once they land in Canada, there is not very much we can do," said one federal source, who asked not to be named.

"That's why pushing out borders is so important."

It seems likely that the Tamil asylum seekers who arrived on the Ocean Lady will eventually be found to be a mix of legitimate refugees, illegitimate economic migrants and some militants.

Sri Lankan Tamils have, for years, been among Canada's top 10 refugee groups. They succeed in their claims more often than not, but either way they can be difficult to deport given the possibility they might face torture or death if sent home.

In Canada, asylum seekers who have credible fears of mistreatment can stymie deportation efforts for years.

With files from Stephanie Chambers

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