

Westcoast News

Cargo ship passenger wanted in Sri Lanka for terrorism; Subject of Interpol notice wanted for unspecified offence among 76 migrants detained after arriving off B.C. coast Saturday

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One of the 76 migrants who arrived off the British Columbia coast in a cargo ship last weekend is wanted in Sri Lanka for terrorism, according to two sources familiar with the investigation.

The sources said the man was Kartheepan Manickavasagar, a 26-year-old who is the subject of an Interpol notice issued by Sri Lankan authorities. He is wanted for an unspecified terrorism offence.

Meanwhile, the mysterious migrant ship that arrived in Canadian waters early Saturday under the name Ocean Lady has been identified as the Cambodian-flagged Princess Easwary, a government official said.

The ship is owned by Ray Ocean Transport Corp., a company registered in the Seychelles, although its mailing address is in the Philippines, according to shipping records kept by Lloyd's Register.

The vessel's operator is listed as Sunship Maritime Services, which uses the same mailing address in Cebu, Philippines. Sunship's phone number appeared to be out of service this week and an e-mail to the company was returned as undeliverable.

The arrival of the ship in B.C. waters has sparked an intensive investigation into the origins of the vessel and the identities of the passengers, who arrived with either fraudulent documentation or none at all.

The screening has so far detected one match with the Interpol database of fugitives. The man is suspected of involvement with the Tamil Tigers, separatist guerrillas outlawed by Canada for terrorism and notorious for their suicide bombings.

But Canadian Tamil Congress spokesman David Poopalapillai said the Sri Lankan wanted-notice should be treated with caution, since the government in Colombo often wrongly accuses ethnic Tamils of terrorism.

"Do not rely on Sri Lankan officials," Poopalapillai said.

Immigration Minister Jason Kenney's spokesman said he could not confirm the names of any of the migrants but said Canadian security and law-enforcement agencies were using fingerprints and other methods to establish their identities.

The Canadian government will move to deport any found to have terrorist or criminal backgrounds, said Alykhan Velshi, the minister's director of communications and parliamentary affairs.

"The government will strenuously argue that every single one of these individuals with terrorist or criminal backgrounds -- and that includes membership in the murderous Tamil Tigers -- is ineligible to make a refugee claim in Canada," Velshi said.

"We won't allow Canada to become a place of refuge for terrorists, thugs, snakeheads and other violent

foreign criminals. Nor will we support those who want to create a two-tier immigration system: one tier for law-abiding immigrants who wait patiently in the queue, and a second, for-profit tier for criminals and terrorists who pay human smugglers to help them jump the queue."

All the passengers on the ship are reportedly ethnic Tamils from Sri Lanka, an island off the coast of India that is emerging from three decades of civil war between government forces and the defeated Tamil Tigers rebels.

Poopalapillai said he was aware of speculation that some of those on the ship could be former Tamil Tigers rebels, but said those details would emerge through the immigration screening process.

"Our answer to this question is: We have a due process. This due process has a mechanism and tools to answer this question. All we are asking [of] our government and our authorities is to put them through due process."

He said relatives of those on board the ship had been coming forward, and the congress met them Wednesday to advise them about how to help. He said about half the migrants have no friends or family in Canada.

The Sri Lankan consul-general in Toronto, Bandula Jayasekara, said it was "hilarious" for the Canadian Tamil Congress to suggest that the ship's passengers would face torture or death if deported to Sri Lanka.

The ship arrived in B.C. waters bearing a name and number that appeared to have been recently painted over the previous identifiers, but according to Lloyd's, the ship was built in Japan in 1990 and was initially named Daiei Maru No. 18. It was renamed Princess Easwary in July 2008.

Records show that in March, it was inspected five times at port to ensure its condition and equipment complied with international maritime standards. The latest annotation on its file was on June 10, and concerned its gears, thrusters and stabilizers.

Rohan Gunaratna, a Singapore-based terrorism expert, said the ship appeared to have been a rebel vessel. During the Sri Lankan civil war, the Tamil Tigers owned a fleet of ships.