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Head off the phantom Tigers' Canadian base

From Tuesday's Globe and Mail

Canada's Tamil diaspora should support peace and reconciliation in their homeland. Otherwise, Toronto risks becoming a base for disaffected members of the Tamil Tigers.

A secessionist Tamil government-in-exile, with the largest bloc made up of Canadian Tamils, will not improve the life of their brethren in Sri Lanka, and will only succeed in impeding that country's ability to rebuild after its recent bloody history.

Rather than relive old battles, Canada's Tamil diaspora should support peace and reconciliation in their homeland. Otherwise, Toronto, home to half of Canada's estimated 200,000 Sri Lankans, risks becoming a base for disaffected members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the group that fought for a quarter century for an independent homeland.

Some experts believe Canada is already an appealing destination for the Tigers, banned here as a terrorist organization in 2006. Professor Rohan Gunaratna, an international terrorism expert based in Singapore, believes some of the 75 Sri Lankan refugee claimants found aboard a rusty vessel last October off the shores of British Columbia took part in terrorism and have connections to the Tigers.

Officials are expected to intervene in more than a dozen of these asylum-claim cases, to argue that the migrants are inadmissible because of possible ties to terrorism or smuggling networks.

The Sri Lankan army crushed the Tigers last year, with a particularly brutal final campaign that displaced hundreds of thousands of Tamils from their homes in the north and the east.

A report released last week by the International Crisis Group called for an independent investigation into alleged war crimes committed against civilians by the army. Government troops intentionally shelled civilians, hospitals and food distribution points, the report said.

The Tamil diaspora should help pressure the government for an independent, credible investigation into these terrible abuses.

But reviving the Tigers' hopeless cause is not helpful.

Last month in Toronto, thousands of members of Sri Lanka's diaspora turned out to vote for a "transnational government" for a non-existent Tamil state. Canada had the largest bloc of seats in this government-in-exile, which critics called a soft rebranding of the Tigers, though candidates denied it. This election went ahead although the new government in Colombo includes 14 Tamils, suggesting it is possible for them to find a political voice within a united Sri Lanka.

Tamils abroad must now help Sri Lanka move forward. Another report by the International Crisis Group says that the Tamil diaspora is "out of touch," and "still in thrall to the LTTE," observing that its fundraising networks still exist.

"The dream of many Canadian Tamils for a truly independent homeland is dead," the report concludes. The sooner they accept this reality, the better for Sri Lanka, and for Canada.