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Weeks after it was turned away from Australia, a Thai cargo ship believed to be carrying about 200 illegal migrants from Sri Lanka is now expected to reach Canada any day.

The question is: Are those aboard terrorists or genuine refugees?

That's the same question that was raised in October when a ship with 76 migrants on board arrived off Vancouver Island. Most of them are now living in Toronto.

As Canada monitors the arrival of the MV Sun Sea, a shrill propaganda war has broken out between the Sri Lankan government and Toronto's large Tamil community.

"Most of them are hardcore LTTE people (Tamil Tigers)," Sumith Dassanayake of the Sri Lankan High Commission in Ottawa said in an interview with the *Star*, adding that women and children are also aboard the ship. "The Tigers are trying to regroup here to keep the movement alive."

He called them a grave security threat to Canada.

But David Poopalapillai of the Canadian Tamil Congress dismissed those accusations, calling it fear-mongering among ordinary Canadians. "This is exactly what the Sri Lankan government had said for the 76 men who came to Canada in October. They all proved they weren't terrorists."

The Tamil Tigers, the military arm of the Tamil separatist movement, fought a bloody civil war with the Sri Lankan government forces for nearly 26 years before being defeated in May 2009. The organization is considered a terrorist group by many countries, including Canada.

The war is over but allegations of ethnic cleansing of the Tamils, a minority in Sri Lanka, continue.

Last October, a rusting ship called the Ocean Lady arrived off the B.C. coast carrying 76 Sri Lankan migrants. They were all detained by the Canada Border Services Agency but eventually released.

At least 70 of the 76 men are now in Toronto, which is home to nearly 200,000 Tamils, believed to be the largest diaspora. An Immigration and Refugee Board spokeswoman has said their refugee claims will be processed over the next 18 months.

Three of those men, in interviews with the *Star*, said they were persecuted then fled because they feared for their lives.

People would only leave their families and homes if they genuinely feared death, said Poopalapillai. "All that we are asking is these people also should be put through the refugee process. If it's proved they have ties to the Tigers, send them back."

The MV Sun Sea has yet to arrive in Canada but there are already reports that another two shiploads of asylum-seekers are ready to sail. They are waiting to see how Canada deals with these 200 people, said a terrorism expert in Singapore.

Rohan Gunaratna, who heads a research centre and is considered an expert on the Tamil Tigers, declined to disclose his sources but he was one of the first people to warn Canada about the MV Sun Sea.

The two other vessels will head to Canada "depending on how these 200 people are dealt with," said Gunaratna. He added the Tigers are raising money by running a human smuggling operation and getting their cadres into Canada at the same time.

He was a witness for the Canadian government while the 76 men were in detention and were being investigated by the border agency.

"They have been released not because they are not terrorists but because the manner in which refugee law exists in Canada," he said.

Meanwhile, the federal government is also concerned about who is aboard the MV Sun Sea, said Public Safety Minister Vic Toews.

He said the Tamil Tigers are behind operations to smuggle people into Canada but would not comment what the government is doing about



The MV Sun Sea, a suspected migrant smuggling vessel, is on its way to Canada. On Monday, August 9, 2010, a terrorism expert warned there could be Tamil Tigers aboard.

Geir Vinnes/shippingspotting.com

the situation.

"I can assure you that we are concerned about who is on that ship and why they might be coming to Canada," he said on Monday while in Toronto to give a speech on national security to the Economic Club of Canada.

While the government will protect genuine refugees, Toews said it will thwart those who try to abuse Canada's immigration policies.

Among many concerns about potential terrorist threats in Canada, Toews singled out "marine human smuggling" as a particular focus of the government.

"I think it's important to send a message that Canada should not be viewed as easy entry into North America and that we are very concerned about security issues," he said after the speech.

While the Sri Lankan government has warned that the MV Sun Sea is engaged in brazen human smuggling, human rights experts argue that the people aboard are legitimate refugees.

Todd Ross, with the Canadian Human Rights Voice, a non-profit group trying to raise awareness of human rights concerns in Sri Lanka, said there was a lot of fear-mongering when the Ocean Lady arrived. But there was no evidence that those men were terrorists.

He also pointed out that the Canadian government has said it would like to reunite families and offered help with visas. "But the problem is our visa officers have no access to north Sri Lanka, where most Tamils live," he said. "So people are doing whatever they can to escape."

Ross, who has been closely following the events in Sri Lanka since the war ended last year, said there's no fear of a wave of boat people coming from the archipelago.

"I don't think there is any infrastructure of that kind," he said. "But each of the refugees has a story and we need to listen to them."

With files from The Canadian Press