

Migrant ship seized off B.C. coast belongs to Tamil Tigers: experts

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OTTAWA , Oct. 25 -- The migrant smuggling ship intercepted off the West Coast carrying 76 Sri Lankan men is owned by the outlawed Tamil Tigers and previously smuggled weapons from North Korea to Sri Lanka, says an international expert on South Asia terrorism.

It's feared the ship may be the first wave of defeated Tamil Tiger fighters fleeing for safe haven after the end of Sri Lanka's 25-year civil war, says another security expert.

Canada hosts the largest population of Sri Lankan Tamils outside of Sri Lanka, and has long been a key support base for the Tigers, which is on Canada's official list of terrorist organizations.

In a radio interview with ABC News in Australia on Saturday, Singapore-based Rohan Gunaratna said the Ocean Lady is a rebel freighter belonging to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the separatist guerrillas known as the Tamil Tigers.

"It is now clear that it is a Tamil Tiger-owned and -operated ship," said Gunaratna, who heads Singapore's International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research. The Sri Lankan native has authored several books on the country's civil war that ended in May, with government troops finally defeating the LTTE.

"Certainly, not all ships that are transporting people are managed by terrorists, but in the case of the Ocean Lady, it is a Tamil Tiger ship that had been used in the past to smuggle weapons from North Korea to Sri Lanka," said Gunaratna.

The ship was intercepted off Vancouver Island on Oct. 16 by RCMP officers supported by the Canadian Forces and Canada Border Service Agency.

The Canadian Tamil Congress says the men are all ethnic Tamils fleeing persecution. But Gunaratna said "a number of individuals" have been identified as suspected Tigers, though he didn't elaborate.

His comments follow reports that one passenger has been identified as a 26-year-old man wanted by Sri Lanka for terrorism. It's not clear if he is the same man apparently found with the logo of the Tigers tattooed on his body.

A spokesman for Immigration Minister Jason Kenney said the government would take steps to deport any passengers with criminal or terrorist backgrounds, including members of the LTTE, which is an outlawed entity in Canada.

The men are being held in Maple Ridge, B.C., and began appearing before the Immigration and Refugee Board last week. One passenger with relatives in Canada was reportedly ordered released from custody. The others remain in custody pending interviews with border officials. Those freed are expected to make refugee claims.

With the collapse of the LTTE in Sri Lanka, Canada can expect to face fresh waves of refugees from Sri Lanka, said Tom Quiggin, an Ottawa terrorism expert who writes for Canada's new international affairs magazine Global Brief.

"The LTTE has not given up on its program of an independent homeland, and they will continue their campaign of violence from wherever they can re-establish themselves," he said Saturday.

"The LTTE, which deserves its description as a terrorist group, will no doubt be looking to move many of its senior leaders and fighters into well-known safe havens such as Canada.

"Intelligence and immigration authorities will have the shadow of the 1985 Air India disaster, a previous intelligence failure, looking over their shoulders as they try to identify this group and the many others that will follow them."

Human-rights groups and Canadian Tamils urge compassion for the men, and are calling for a broader public understanding of the complex political situation in Sri Lanka. As members of Sri Lanka's Tamil minority, the men face torture or death if returned to their homeland, they say.

"These men have fled murder and abduction, which is very rampant in Sri Lanka . . . and they are seeking a refuge where they will be safe and that, to them, is Canada," said Sue Nathan of the Canadian Tamil Congress in a news conference outside the Citizenship and Immigration Canada offices in Vancouver.

Lorne Waldman, a Toronto immigration lawyer representing six of the men, said that, to his knowledge, the vast majority have no ties to the Tigers. "That is just my preliminary information. Obviously, we are going to have to wait and see what Canada finds out," he said.

Waldman said five of his clients have family in Canada and have been able to provide Canadian authorities with original identification documents. He's hopeful that will be enough to allow their release from detention as early as this week.

Meanwhile, National Post reporter Stewart Bell, who has written extensively on the LTTE, reports the ship, sailing under the false name of Ocean Lady, departed from India early last month, according to international shipping records.

After a stop in Mumbai on Aug. 31, the ship formerly known as the Princess Easwary sailed from the northwest Indian port of Mundra on Sept. 8. That was its last recorded port of call until it entered Canadian waters.

Sgt. Duncan Pound, spokesman for the RCMP Border Integrity Program, declined to comment on what police had discovered so far, but said tracing the ship was an integral part of the investigation.

But investigating the ship will be a challenge. Registered in Cambodia, the Princess Easwary visited ports in Indonesia, Taiwan, Japan and the Philippines in 2008, according to Lloyds MIU, which tracks vessel movements.

While records indicate the ship's last port of call was India, it may have made unreported stops elsewhere in South or Southeast Asia to pick up its human cargo before heading for Canada, reports Bell.

The company listed as the ship's owner does not appear to exist. Published by HT Syndication with permission from The Colombo Times. For more information on news feed please contact Sarabjit Jagirdar at htsyndication@hindustantimes.com