

Officials allege Tamil refugee ship smuggling explosives

BY STEWART BELL, NATIONAL POST NOVEMBER 3, 2009



A slight amount of explosives has been detected on a ship that smuggled Sri Lankans to the West Coast of B.C. last month.

Photograph by: The Province, The Province

TORONTO — Immigration officials are alleging that trace amounts of explosives were found aboard a cargo ship that smuggled 76 Sri Lankans to Canada's West Coast last month, a lawyer representing some of the men said.

Lee Rankin said Monday the "slight bit of residue found on a couple of items," together with news clippings linking the vessel to the Tamil Tigers rebels, were being used by the Canada Border Services Agency to justify detaining the men.

"They are alleging that this was a ship for transporting explosives," Rankin said. "But I guess my comment is, if that boat had been used in that fashion in the past, there was no way of knowing it. Let's put it this way, apparently 80 per cent of U.S. currency tests positive for cocaine."

He said tests had detected explosive residue on clothing belonging to "one or two" of the ship's passengers but called the matter irrelevant.

"What's relevant is who these people are and getting a detailed understanding of why they left their country," he said.

Since the Ocean Lady arrived in Canadian waters on Oct. 17, police and immigration officials have been investigating the identities and backgrounds of its human cargo, members of Sri Lanka's ethnic Tamil minority.

One of the men who made the month-long voyage from Southeast Asia has been identified as Kartheepan Manickavasagar, who is wanted by Sri Lanka for his alleged role in a procurement ring that smuggled electronic equipment to the Tamil Tigers, but his Toronto lawyer has denied the charge. The Immigration and Refugee Board held detention reviews for most of the men last week but a dozen

cases were adjourned until this week after the CBSA indicated it would be seeking their detention on grounds of security.

Rankin said the CBSA's security argument is based on the explosive residue found by police and allegations by Prof. Rohan Gunaratna, a Singapore-based terrorism expert and author of several books on the Tamil Tigers, that the ship had been part of the rebel weapons smuggling fleet.

Rankin called the allegations laughable and accused the CBSA of attempting to "poison the well" by disclosing information that puts the men in a negative light. He said many of the refugee claimants have family in Canada to support them and arrived carrying authentic identity documents.

In a speech in Ottawa on Friday, RCMP Commissioner William Elliott said while it was too soon to conclude whether any of those who arrived aboard the ship posed a threat to Canada "the fact of their arrival, and the potential for others to follow, does raise security concerns."

He said the defeat of the Tamil Tigers had ended the insurgency but that the rebels remained a terrorist group that "could potentially have a significant impact on Canada."

Canada is "one of the few places in the world where LTTE terrorists and supporters might seek to hide in plain sight, and potentially launch terrorist operations," he said.

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