

The Canadian Press - ONLINE EDITION

RCMP, CBSA expected to board ship that may be carrying Tamil Tigers this week

By: Sunny Dhillon, The Canadian Press

Posted: 10/08/2010 5:36 PM | [Comments: 4](#) | Last Modified: 11/08/2010 1:02 AM

VANCOUVER - RCMP and the Canada Border Services Agency are expected to board a ship that may be carrying Tamil Tigers sometime this week, says the spokesman for a B.C. municipality.

John Leeburn with the District of Maple Ridge, 45 kilometres east of Vancouver, said Tuesday that two local prisons will be used to house those on board the MV Sun Sea.

The Thai cargo ship is reported to be carrying about 200 Sri Lankans.

Ottawa has expressed concern about members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam — a banned terrorist organization in Canada — being on board the vessel.

Leeburn said district officials were briefed about the plan late last week by wardens at the Fraser Regional Correctional Centre and the Alouette Correctional Centre for women.

"What we were told was that mid-week this week, the RCMP and Canada Border Services would be boarding the vessel off-shore and that ultimately the vessel would dock in Victoria," he said in an interview.

Leeburn said about 100 men and 80 women would then be transported to the two provincial prisons. He couldn't say where any children would be housed if they were found on board.

RCMP declined comment on the matter Tuesday. Foreign Affairs could not immediately be reached.

Public Safety Minister Vic Toews said Monday the federal government is monitoring the situation closely. He declined to comment on the specifics of the government's plan.

Toews did say that while the government is committed to protecting genuine refugees, it will thwart those who try to abuse Canada's immigration policies.

The ship heading to British Columbia contains both members of the Tamil Tigers, the military arm of the Tamil separatist movement, and Sri Lankan Tamils who paid them huge sums for safe passage, said Professor Rohan Gunaratna, at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.

Gunaratna, who's studied the organization for more than 20 years, said the MV Sun Sea was initially bound for Australia but changed course when its crew realized the country has toughened up its refugee laws.

"The Tamil Tigers currently are laughing at Canada, how naive the Canadians are, and I believe that Canada should take a stand that it will not permit anyone who has engaged in terrorism ... to enter Canada," he said.

Two more ships are set to deploy from Thailand or Indonesia in coming months based on Canada's response to the MV Sun Sea, he said.

"Other ships will continue to arrive in Canada and the human smugglers will earn a lot of money and this money will be used both to revive a terrorist campaign in Sri Lanka and elsewhere," he said.

"Canada's reputation as a safe haven for terrorism will be very well established."

Jess Gunnarson, a spokesman for the B.C. Corrections Branch, said there hasn't been any official confirmation the ship is arriving.

"A number of the operational decisions that need to be made in terms of where people are going to be housed and under what circumstances really can't be made until it's confirmed that they're arriving," he said in an interview.

He added the province can't comment on exactly where individuals might be held for privacy and security reasons, but finding room shouldn't be a problem.

"We have a long-standing agreement that we will accommodate anybody who is being held through an immigration process," he said.

"We will create capacity to absorb however many individuals we have to."

Last October, a ship carrying 76 Sri Lankan migrants was intercepted in Canadian waters off the B.C. coast after crossing the Pacific from Sri Lanka.

The group on board the Ocean Lady claimed to be fleeing persecution after the country's bloody 26-year civil war.

There were concerns some had links to the Tamil Tigers, but an Immigration and Refugee Board spokeswoman has said all 76 of the Sri Lankan migrants from that ship have been released and their refugee claims will be processed over the next 19 months or so.

Gunaratna said Captain Vinod, who heads the MV Sun Sea, is deputy to the captain who steered the Ocean Lady to Canada.

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