



Ship nearing Canada run by Tamil Tigers: expert

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Updated: Tue. Aug. 10 2010 4:18 PM ET

A terrorism expert says the cargo ship carrying an estimated 200 Sri Lankans toward British Columbia is being managed by the Tamil Tigers, and may be carrying a number of its members.

Canadian and U.S. authorities have been monitoring the Thai cargo ship for weeks. Yesterday, Public Safety Minister Vic Toews said he was concerned that the vessel may be transporting members of the Tamil Tigers, which is considered a terrorist organization in Canada.

Rohan Gunaratna, the head of research at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism in Singapore, echoed that view. He said the group has even been known to use ships carrying legitimate Sri Lankan refugee claimants to transport its leaders abroad.

The Tamil Tigers represent the military arm of the Tamil separatist movement in northern Sri Lanka. They lost a long-running civil war last year. And since then, members of the group who ran the Tigers' shipping and procurement network have branched out into human smuggling operations, Gunaratna said.

As evidence, he pointed to the Ocean Lady, a ship that arrived in British Columbia carrying 76 Sri Lankan refugee claimants last October. That vessel had previously been used by the Tamil Tigers to transport weapons from North Korea to Sri Lanka, he said.

In July, a Sri Lankan newspaper reported that a second ship, MV Sun Sea, was travelling to British Columbia carrying 200 migrants, including members of the Tamil Tigers.

But the Canadian Tamil Congress says Ottawa shouldn't prejudge the ship before it arrives.

"We don't condone these ship voyages. It's very risky, it's deadly," said David Poopalapillai, a Canadian Tamil Congress spokesperson. "But we understand, at the same time, why these people are coming. Desperate times push people to desperate measures."

He said the government should avoid "painting everybody with the same brush" using unreliable information from the Sri Lankan government, and should let Canadian law dictate who on the ship will be deemed a refugee.

"If you find any people inadmissible after putting them through due process, then yes, go after them," Poopalapillai said.

Toews said on Monday that Ottawa is committed to protecting genuine refugees, but will foil attempts to abuse the country's immigration policies.

However, Gunaratna said that Canada has become a favourite destination for Tamil Tigers because of Ottawa's "extremely weak" national security laws.

If the federal government allows everyone aboard the MV Sun Sea into Canada, he added, the Tamils may sail more ships loaded with purported refugees towards British Columbia in the months ahead.

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