

## Sri Lanka urges hard line on Tamil asylum-seekers

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There are claims most refugees return home within a year

SRI Lanka's security supremo has called on Canberra to get tough with asylum-seekers amid claims the vast majority return home within a year.

The call by Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa came as terrorism expert Rohan Gunaratna said 70 per cent of Tamils granted asylum in Australia and Canada had returned to Sri Lanka for a visit.

Mr Rajapaksa said the navy and police, now with the command of the seas around the island, had stopped the flow of boats from Sri Lanka's shores. "We have not recently had a single case of people going from here in boats to seek asylum," he said.

Now, instead, people travel to third countries by air and set off from there, he told The Australian.

Mr Rajapaksa, the brother of the Sri Lankan President, Mahinda, said that after the defeat of the Tamil Tigers in May last year after a 26-year insurgency there was no reason for Tamils to seek asylum overseas. "There is no reason why anybody should leave Sri Lanka out of any fear. They have the freedom to live anywhere," said the former lieutenant colonel, who narrowly escaped a suicide bombing attempt on his life four years ago. "When people come to know that countries are sympathetic and give them asylum, it is very difficult to stop.

"The Australian government has to be very strict on anybody to whom they are considering granting asylum. If they just stopped giving asylum, it would be much easier to stop this process."

The Singapore-based Professor Gunaratna described the Defence Secretary -- a 20-year army veteran, brought back by his brother from a successful information technology career in California to mastermind the defeat of the Tamil Tigers -- as "the second-most powerful man in Sri Lanka". "It doesn't really matter to Sri Lanka whether these people leave or not. But for Australia, it does. Seventy per cent of those who have been granted refugee status in Australia or Canada then return to visit Sri Lanka within one year," he said.

Mr Rajapaksa said that some Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam cadres escaped the final collapse of their military campaign. "We know there are a few groups trying to continue the fight in a different form.

"Obviously there could be a re-grouping in other countries. So the Australian government has to be very careful in deploying its intelligence agencies on this issue."

He said Sri Lanka had been working "very closely" with Australia, "especially on human-smuggling", with visits by Australian police and naval officials.

Mr Rajapaksa said that the Sri Lankan government had been unable to match the "heavy propaganda and lobbying" of the Tamil diaspora, influenced by the Tigers, in many Western countries including Australia.

The government has invited opinion leaders of that diaspora to visit Sri Lanka as it emerges from the war, and to visit centres of past conflict. Those who had gone, including some from Australia, had "returned pleased."