

'Tigers' hand in human trafficking

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The smuggling of Sri Lankan Tamils to Australia and other Western destinations bears the mark of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, which observers say are turning to the trade to boost their funds, writes **NEVILLE DE SILVA**

AUSTRALIA and Canada are the prime targets of people smugglers transporting human cargo by sea to these destinations. Attempts to penetrate Australia's *cordon sanitaire* by human smugglers operating out of South and Southeast Asian bases have had political repercussions in Australia and led to diplomatic negotiations between Canberra and Jakarta on what to do with the hundreds of Sri Lankan Tamils on board.

While Australia is seeking to tighten up procedures for admitting asylum seekers, Canada is now in a quandary after the ship *Sun Sea*, carrying more than 490 would-be refugees, illegally entered its waters. This was the second ship to bring asylum seekers to Canada since the *Ocean Lady*, with 76 migrants on board, did so last October.

It is clear that the vast majority of the refugees are Sri Lankan Tamils and that they had boarded the ships to Australia and Canada from points in Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand.

In the course of an ongoing court case in Australia, a self-confessed people smuggler said some of the 20 people he had helped put on board a ship departing Indonesia with 196 people in June last year came from Malaysia.

Though smuggling Sri Lankan Tamils to Western destinations by air, land and sea is nothing new, what attracted wide international media attention was the 10-week sea journey of a dilapidated ship with 492 passengers on board, captained by a seasoned sailor reportedly linked with the arms-smuggling operations of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Sri Lankan separatist group militarily defeated over a year ago.

Thailand has become the focus of attention of Canadian media because the Thai-registered ship was purchased by a Sri Lankan Tamil and its passengers were believed to have arrived in Thailand over a period of several weeks on tourist visas, and later ferried in boatloads to the ship that had initially left from



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Thai waters.

If, as Canadian diplomatic sources say, most of the passengers now in Canada are likely to stay there, people smugglers will be emboldened to set out to sea with another ship. More refugees are waiting to make the journey and another ship is apparently being readied to make the trip from southern Thailand.

As Canada and Thailand agonise over what can and should be done to end this perilous passage to Canada, the more fundamental issue concerns Western countries becoming home to the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora.

Reportedly, the cost of passage per person to Australia is US\$15,000 to US\$20,000 (RM46,700 to RM62,300) and to Canada US\$40,000 to US\$50,000. Several of these refugee ships have had women and children on board, indicating that families were part of the human cargo. Assuming two or three members of a family were doing the voyage to Canada, the total cost is hardly likely to have been paid at the Sri Lanka end.

The funds had to come from outside Sri Lanka. But from whom and where? It is critical to raise this issue, given the long history of money-laundering, credit card and other financial scams involving sections of the Tamil diaspora.

The number of detections made by authorities in Western

countries as well as Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, the Philippines and India indicates widespread attempts to steal and move money around, often in violation of money-laundering conventions and other laws.

Sri Lankan Tamil organisations abroad will surely say that the substantial payments for passage come from family and friends resident abroad. Many such relatives themselves had gone as migrants — legally or otherwise — and not generally in jobs drawing big salaries. The truth seems to lie elsewhere. The Toronto *Sun* quoted a Canadian police source saying an LTTE cell in Canada had organised the *Sun Sea* smuggling trip.

Meanwhile, a *Globe and Mail* report out of Songkhla, Thailand, the port from which the smuggling operation appears to have been launched, said the vessel renamed *Sun Sea* had been bought by a Sri Lankan Tamil for 5.35 million baht (RM538,000). Surely, a huge sum to pay for a vessel that its previous owners believed was so unseaworthy that they were afraid to send it even to neighbouring Malaysia.

Who would have that kind of money to buy a broken-down vessel demanding immediate delivery in order to smuggle Sri Lankan Tamils to the West? But the LTTE in earlier years collected enormous funds and sequestered them away in various

ways and places.

The first attempt to breach Australian surveillance with a refugee ship was in June last year, shortly after the LTTE was militarily defeated and its leadership killed. Indonesian people smugglers were used on this occasion. But the ships that went to Canada were most likely an LTTE operation; the two skippers were said to have LTTE links.

The LTTE needs funds. The hardcore Tamil diaspora still longs for an independent Tamil Eelam. Mounting a major military campaign in Sri Lanka to achieve it is extremely remote. Therefore, they wish to mount a propaganda blitz against Sri Lanka in the West and try to influence some of the members of the Non-Aligned Movement against Sri Lanka in an attempt to isolate it diplomatically.

The death of the LTTE leadership and the end of the Eelam dream for many diaspora Tamils, along with the arrest reportedly in Kuala Lumpur of Kumaran Pathmanathan, an LTTE arms purchaser and fundraiser, have obviously affected LTTE coffers.

Human trafficking is one way of raising funds. "Come now and pay later" was an old LTTE slogan. Those who have gone to Canada now could be paying for it for many years to come.

■ The writer is a veteran Sri Lankan journalist