

# Canada: Rally Protests Continued Detention of Tamil Asylum Seekers in BC

Monday 27 September 2010, by [ANNIS Roger](#) (Date first published: 20 September 2010).

Seventy-five people staged a noisy rally in Vancouver on September 11 in support of 492 Tamil asylum seekers who landed on Canada's west coast on August 13. The rally was organized by the Vancouver chapter of No One Is Illegal.

Sign in Tamil language - We welcome you, We support you!

The rally was held outside the Burnaby Youth Detention Center where many of the 63 women and 49 children who were on board the MV Sun Sea were held. (Burnaby is a suburb of Vancouver). Noisemakers and loud music were deployed to send a message to the asylum seekers that they have strong support in Canada for their claim for refugee status. Another rally at the same location by the same organizers will take place on September 19.

One month after surviving a three-month voyage across the Pacific Ocean, all the asylum seekers remain locked up and families forcibly separated. Canada's immigration service is providing as little information as possible about their applications for political asylum. Even Canadian-resident relatives of the detained are being stonewalled.

## Political Debate Over Refugee Policy

The arrival of the ship has sparked widespread political debate in Canada over refugee policy.

The federal government has painted the asylum seekers as "queue jumpers," potential terrorists and victims of "human trafficking."

Prime Minister Stephen Harper said on August 17: "We are a land of refuge, but at the same time, I think Canadians are pretty concerned when a whole boat of people comes, not through any normal application process ... and just simply lands."

Public Safety Minister Vic Toews said on the day the Sun Sea arrived that his government "must ensure that our refugee system is not hijacked by criminals or terrorists."

He said the Sun Sea is a "test boat," to be followed by others, "part of an organized criminal enterprise." In fact, the arrival of a refugee ship such as the Sun Sea is rare in Canada.

The effort to whip up public sentiment against the Tamils follows the adoption of a new federal refugee law on June 29. Bill C-11 was rushed through parliament with all-party support. It speeds up the refugee application process as demanded by rights advocates, but also introduces new restrictions on asylum seekers.

The government and its backers in mainstream media face several obstacles in their effort to turn public opinion against asylum seekers from Sri Lanka. For one, the claims of political persecution by Tamils in Sri Lanka (where Tamils make up about 15% of a population of 20 million) are demonstrably true.

## **Battle for Public Opinion**

On August 16, the Tamil Canadian Congress released several letters from asylum applicants from the Sun Sea. The letters detailed the ongoing political repression faced by Tamils in Sri Lanka one year after the government's war against Tamil self-determination ended in a defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the largest military force among the Tamil population. The content of the letters was widely reported in print and broadcast media.

Seven thousand civilians were killed in the closing months of the war. Hundreds of thousands of Tamils were placed in detention camps while arbitrary arrests, disappearances and murders at the hands of government forces continue to this day.

Many human rights agencies have detailed these conditions, including Amnesty International and the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR). The Sri Lankan government has refused all calls for an independent investigation into the conduct of its armed forces during the war.

The Harper government is also hindered by the appreciation among many in Canada that there is no such thing as an "application process" for many refugees fleeing persecution. Refugees fleeing for their safety, or that of their families, have the right under national and international laws to seek refuge by whatever humanitarian means are at their disposal.

Canada's dark history of turning away asylum seekers, notably Jews fleeing persecution from Nazi Germany in the 1930s, is widely taught in schools and embedded in popular consciousness. It seems the government and its backers would have no problem with a return to those days, but most Canadians would not let such a thing happen.

The Tamil community in Canada is working hard to win the release of the detainees. Members of several church denominations in the Vancouver region have offered to act as sponsors. But the government and immigration service continue to prolong the detentions.

The September 7 Globe and Mail said the federal government is exploring different options to stop more Tamils from making asylum applications. One plan is to turn back ships on the high seas. Sri Lanka's ambassador to Canada said this option was explored in consultations between her government and Canada's as the Sun Sea approached Canadian waters.

Some newspaper editorialists and political commentators have spoken favourably of Australia's version of this policy. It has built internment camps for Tamils and other asylum seekers on Christmas Island, a colony it acquired in 1957, located 2600 kilometres northwest of Perth with some 1500 permanent residents.

Sadly for proponents of this option, Canada has no offshore colony far enough from its shores to make this an easy choice.

The more active option being sought by the government is to work with cooperative governments in Asia to block Tamil or other asylum seekers at their point of departure.

Canada processes about 25,000 applications for political asylum per year. It processes an extra 10,000 applications a year made abroad.

The UNHCR says there are 146,098 Tamil refugees in the world as of January 2010. About half reside in India, the rest are dispersed in 57 other countries.

The last ship carrying Tamil refugees to Canada was the Ocean Lady, which arrived in Canada on

October 17, 2009 with 76 people on board. They faced a lengthy asylum application process in which the government tried to prove links to "terrorism" in Sri Lanka. But after several months of tense hearings, all 76 were released from detention.

As Vancouver Sun columnist Stephen Hume reported on August 26, Canada has accepted 92% of Tamil refugee claims, an implicit recognition that Sri Lanka is one of the most dangerous places on Earth.

The Canadian Council on Refugees said the burden of caring for refugees falls hardest on poor countries. In 2006, for example, Tanzania took in more refugees than Canada, France, Australia, the U.S., Germany, Spain and Japan combined.

Canada has long backed the human-rights violating government of Sri Lanka. In 2006, it banned the LTTE as a terrorist organization. Anyone belonging to it or supporting it is subject to draconian consequences. The government is creating a belief that all Tamil asylum seekers are members or supporters of the LTTE unless they can prove otherwise.

On September 13, an immigration service official ordered the release from detention of one of the adult detainees, along with her three children. The mother still bears injuries suffered during the war and is pregnant with her fourth child. Government lawyers unsuccessfully opposed the release. But the government is aggressively seeking to block other releases that have been ordered by immigration department adjudicators. One consequence of this is to quickly drain the legal funds available to the detainees.

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\* Roger Annis resides in Vancouver and can be reached at rogerannis(at)hotmail.com. For more information on the 492 asylum seekers who arrived in Canada on board the MV Sun Sea, read, "Experts say security reasons may keep Tamils in detention," Vancouver Sun, September 6, 2010.