

Canadian military detains Tamil asylum seekers

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Last Thursday evening Canadian security forces boarded and seized a ship, the *MV Sun Sea*, bearing some 490 Sri Lankan Tamil men, women, and children, shortly after it entered Canadian territorial waters off the coast of British Columbia.

The operation involved the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Canada Border Services Agency and was spearheaded by a CAF guided-missile frigate, the *HMCS Winnipeg*.

A Thai-flagged cargo ship, the *MV Sun Sea* was then brought to the CAF's Esquimalt naval base on Vancouver Island. There the Tamil refugees were interrogated. Those determined not to be sick have been transferred, under police guard, to two jails located in the suburbs of the mainland City of Vancouver.

Fleeing Sri Lanka's right-wing Sinhala chauvinist regime, the refugees had traveled across the Indian and Pacific Oceans for almost three months in the cramped quarters of the ship's cargo hold. Press reports, citing interviews with relatives of the refugees already resident in Canada, claim the asylum seekers paid \$45,000 dollars per person for their passage to Canada.

The arrival of the Tamil refugees off Canada's west coast has been the occasion for a virulent round of anti-immigrant hysteria led by representatives of Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government and amplified by the corporate media.

Public Safety Minister Vic Toews immediately branded some of the ship's occupants as "human smugglers and terrorists." Claiming that other such ships were on their way to Canada, he declared the *MV Sun Sea* a "test boat," with the implication that an example must be made of the refugees so as to dissuade others from coming to Canada.

"Human smuggling, illegal migration or any other abuses of Canada's immigration system can not and

will not be tolerated," declared Toews. "As we deal with this current situation under Canadian law, Canadian officials will look at all available options to strengthen our laws in order to address this unacceptable abuse of international law and Canadian generosity."

According to press reports, the Conservative government is considering introducing legislation that would place refugee claimants who come to Canada in cargo ships in a new category, so as to deny them the legal protections that must be accorded refugees under international and Canadian law. Already the previous Liberal government passed legislation to deny those who enter Canada from a so-called "safe third country" the right to claim refugee status, in order to drastically curtail the number of refugees.

As for the corporate media, it has acted as if an invasion was imminent. Late last week, as the *MV Sun Sea* approached Canadian waters, media outlets breathlessly gave hourly updates of the ship's course. They claimed, erroneously and without any substantiation, that tuberculosis was rampant amongst the migrants and warned that at least two more ships laden with "undesirables" were steaming towards Canadian shores.

In an editorial published in its Thursday morning edition, the neo-conservative *National Post*, demanded the government prevent the *MV Sun Sea* from ever entering Canadian waters so as to prevent Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) operatives from coming to Canada. The same morning, Canada's newspaper of record, the *Globe and Mail*, published an editorial titled "Keeping a Lockout of Tigers" that said the imminent arrival of the Tamil "boat people" has demonstrated the need to make to make Canada's refugee-determination system more restrictive.

This is not the first time that the terrorist canard has been raised by Canada's establishment against desperate Tamil refugees. Last October, when 76 young Tamil men arrived on the *Ocean Lady*, it was reported that at least 25 of the refugees had links to the Tamil Tigers. But after months of intensive investigation, none of the men were deemed to be a security threat. All have been released into the country's 300,000 strong Tamil community, pending hearing of their refugee claims.

If members of Sri Lanka's Tamil minority are willing to risk the hazards of a long sea voyage in a cargo ship and even pay tens of thousands of dollars to do so, it is because they face dire poverty and state discrimination at home.

Sri Lanka's Tamil-majority north and east were devastated by decades of civil war and the 2005 tsunami. Then in 2008-2009, the Sri Lankan military mounted a war of extermination against the LTTE that laid waste to LTTE-controlled towns and villages. Thousands of civilians were killed in this offensive. Many of those who escaped the fighting arrived at Manik Farm and other government-run detention centres, emaciated, injured or ill. To cover up their wars crimes, the Sri Lankan authorities expelled all journalists and aid organizations.

With the final defeat of the LTTE in May 2009, the Sri Lankan army herded upwards of 280,000 people into squalid detention camps surrounded by barbed wire and armed soldiers. There Tamil youth were beaten and regularly "disappeared" without a trace and women raped by security forces and government-allied militias.

In an on-the-spot report by the WSWWS earlier this year, correspondents found that food was limited in the detention camps: "The weekly ration is just a kilogram each of rice, flour and sugar and 100 grams of lentils or dhal per person. People have no money to buy other essentials. They do not get fish, meat, eggs or vegetables. The rations are obviously inadequate and many children and adults are suffering from malnutrition. Water is also scarce. Each inmate receives five litres of drinking water per week". Even with the recent release of tens of thousands of detainees, most people have not been allowed to return to their own villages and towns. They continue to be subjected to stringent travel restrictions and police reporting

requirements.

Canada, like the other Western powers, bears direct responsibility for the horrific conditions confronting Sri Lanka's Tamils. The Canadian government encouraged Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa to scuttle the peace process with the LTTE and resume all-out war by declaring the LTTE a terrorist organization in 2006.

Members and supporters of the minority Harper government clearly see the arrival of Tamil refugees on Canada's shores as an opportunity to exploit for political advantage.

They are using it as a "wedge issue," raising the hoary spectre of "queue jumpers" and "criminals" imposing themselves on the generosity of "hard-working" Canadian citizens to promote their reactionary "law and order" and "national security" agendas.

So crude, manipulative and cynical is this campaign that even some press commentators have felt compelled to criticize it. In a column titled "Tamil Ships Bring What the Tories Need," the *National Post's* Don Martin called the Harper government's "heavy-handed" response "a classic political diversion tactic."

That it is. But its full aims are much broader and more sinister. The turn of capitalist governments the world over toward anti-refugee and anti-immigrant politics serves the most reactionary ends—to justify the build-up of the repressive apparatus of the state and to try to split the working class so as to render it unable to mount a counter-offensive against the assault on jobs, social programs and democratic rights.



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