

Canada's government foments reaction over Tamil refugee boat

Keith Jones
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Canada's Public Safety Minister Vic Toews declared once again yesterday that the country's laws will have to be beefed up to prevent boatloads of desperate people fleeing persecution and poverty from seeking refuge in Canada.

Last Thursday, Canada's Conservative government mounted a massive military-security operation off the country's West Coast, using a Canadian Armed Forces' (CAF) frigate and planes to intercept a Thai-flagged cargo ship carrying 492 Sri Lankan Tamils.

This operation, which was cheered on by the corporate media, was aimed at portraying the arrival of the Tamils, many of whom are women and children, as a grave security threat and at trashing their claim for refugee status as illegitimate "queue-jumping."

In fact, under Canadian and international law Canada is legally obliged to offer sanctuary to those fleeing political persecution and to give those applying for asylum an opportunity to establish the validity of their claim.

After seizing the ship, the MV Sun Sea, Canada's military and security forces escorted it to a nearby CAF naval base. There the Tamil "boat people" were interrogated, then dispatched to two prisons for detention pending hearing of their claims to political refugee status.

Without providing any evidence, Toews and other government spokesmen have repeatedly said that the MV Sun Sea's voyage to Canada was likely organized by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) with the aim of infiltrating terrorists into Canada and raising funds. Those on board are said to have paid \$40,000 or \$50,000 for their passage.

The Conservative government and much of the media insist that this purported security threat requires that Canada's refugee laws be made still more restrictive.

While the government has yet to make any firm proposals, they have suggested that the laws may be changed so as to strip those who arrive in Canada on non-

authorized boats of some or all the rights accorded refugee claimants.

Speaking Sunday, Toews indicated that the government may also use the country's anti-terrorism laws to prosecute any Canadians of Tamil origin who helped fund the passage of their relatives to Canada on the MV Sun Sea. Under Canada's draconian anti-terrorism laws it is illegal to donate money to an organization which, like the LTTE, has been officially designated by the federal government as a terrorist organization.

The press, no doubt encouraged by the Conservatives behind the scenes, has proposed a series of other reactionary measures, many of them modeled on those taken by Australia. These include using the navy to intercept ships on the high seas, so as to prevent refugees from entering into Canada's territorial waters, and establishing detention camps for refugee claimants in inhospitable areas far from any urban center or even outside Canada.

It should be noted that Prime Minister Stephen Harper has repeatedly expressed his admiration for Australia's former prime minister and close George W. Bush ally, John Howard. With a view to justifying the buildup of the repressive powers of the state and using jingoism to manipulate mounting social frustration and divert it into reactionary channels, Howard repeatedly mounted virulent anti-immigrant and anti-refugee campaigns. Most infamously, there is evidence that suggests his government deliberately delayed organizing a rescue operation for a boatload of refugees coming to Australia from Indonesia at a time when Howard and his Liberals were seeking re-election on a "get tough" against refugees platform. (See "*The tragedy of SIEV X: Did the Australian government deliberately allow 353 refugees to drown?*"—*Part 1 of a four-part series.*)

There is no doubt that the minority Harper government has seized on the arrival of the MV Sun Sea to promote its

own reactionary and diversionary anti-crime and anti-terrorism agendas and in so doing is openly fanning anti-immigrant prejudice.

If it feels compelled to craft such manipulative appeals, it is because it recognizes that there is in fact only a narrow base of popular support for its program of slashing public services, cutting taxes for big business and the rich, and rearming and expanding the military so it can be deployed in foreign wars. At the same time, the building up of the national-security apparatus goes hand-in-hand with the criminalizing of dissent. This was exemplified by the massive and provocative police operation mounted against the anti-G20 protests in Toronto less than two months ago.

Serious and sinister as this is, the Harper government, in raising a furor over the Sri Lankan Tamil “boat people,” is not just seeking to further its own reactionary agenda. It is also giving a boost to Sri Lanka’s authoritarian, communalist government—a government that is implicated in horrific war crimes.

In the days and weeks preceding last week’s seizure of the MV Sun Sea by Canada’s military, the Sri Lankan regime urged the Canadian government to take action against it on the grounds it was a terrorist ship.

Gotabaya Rajapakse, Sri Lanka’s Defence Minister and the brother of the country’s president, Mahinda Rajapakse, told a conference organized by the Sri Lankan navy at the beginning of the month that the MV Sun Sea was part of the LTTE’s international terrorist network.

Although Sri Lanka’s government boasts about its military victory over the LTTE, it is determined to continue to present itself as under terrorist threat, including from the Tamil emigre or diaspora community, and this for two reasons. First because it wants a pretext for the maintenance of a vast repressive apparatus and restrictions on civil liberties, as it introduces measures aimed at making the workers and toilers of Sri Lanka—Sinhala and Tamil alike—pay for the huge expense of the thirty year civil war and the current economic crisis. Second, it wants to delegitimize any and all opposition to its chauvinist anti-Tamil policies.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has always made clear its opposition to the ethno-communalist politics of the LTTE and its campaign for the creation of a separate capitalist state on the north and east of the island of Sri Lanka. But in so doing, we have stated that responsibility for the 30-year civil war lies with the Sinhala bourgeoisie, which attacked the Tamil minority over decades with an

escalating series of discriminatory measures and waves of communal violence. At root this communal politics was not only a struggle to monopolize the state’s resources. It was an instrument used to divert the social tensions arising from the failure of independent bourgeois rule and split the working class.

With the end of the civil war nothing has changed.

As some of the refugees from the *MV Sun Sea* explained in a letter obtained by the *National Post*: “The Sri Lankan Government says that the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka has come to an end. However, neither the Prevention of Terrorism Act [which allows for arbitrary arrest of civilians] nor the Emergency Regulations Act have been abolished. Innocent Tamil people detained in prisons have not been released. Displaced civilians have not been resettled in their own homes. Instead, there is a widespread occurrences of disappearances, mass murders and extortion.”

Such communal politics have by no means been restricted to Sri Lanka. Indeed, they have been for decades a feature of bourgeois rule in virtually all the impoverished capitalist countries of Africa and Asia.

The Harper government’s broadside against refugees is part of a growing pattern of anti-refugee, anti-immigrant, and anti-Muslim scapegoating in the advanced capitalist countries, from Obama’s militarization of the US-Mexican border through France’s attempts to ban the burqa.

Under condition of deepening social crisis, the bourgeoisie in the historically privileged countries is now incubating its own forms of communal politics and this proceeds side-by-side with ever-deeper attacks on democratic rights.



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