

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Sri Lanka seeks deal to share intelligence on migrants

Pact would help stop shiploads of Tamils from heading for Canada, high commissioner says

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Sri Lanka is urging Canada to share more of its intelligence if it is serious about tackling what both countries have warned could be a human smuggling operation with ties to the Tamil Tigers.

Sri Lankan High Commissioner Chitranganee Wagiswara said in an interview on Monday that there have been “unofficial discussions” with Canadian authorities in recent weeks on the subject, but that more could be done between the two countries.

“There is no deal at the moment,” Ms. Wagiswara said. “I think exchange of information and intelligence is the key.”

She said the arrangement would be similar to a deal Sri Lanka reached with Australia last November to improve the flow of intelligence information between the countries. The deal fuelled the impression among Sri Lankans that Australia will stop at nothing to prevent an influx of Tamil migrants. While many Tamils have headed to Australia in the past, experts say there is a perception now that it is easier for them to enter Canada.

Canadian officials refused to respond publicly to the Sri Lankan proposal, although Public Safety Minister Vic Toews has said in recent days that the only way to prevent ships from coming to Canada is to stop them before they leave foreign ports.

“Discussions we might or might not be having with Sri Lanka on the issue are privileged, and as such, details about the issue are not something we would make public,” said Foreign Affairs spokeswoman Laura Markle.

Tamil groups in Canada responded that Ottawa cannot trust information from Sri Lankan officials, saying the country has been criticized for its human-rights record and is not serving the interests of its Tamil minority.

Ottawa is processing some 500 Tamil refugee claimants who arrived in British Columbia last week, and has raised the possibility that other boats are on their way. Federal officials have discussed changing laws or obtaining greater co-operation from Asian countries to stop the human smugglers, but have said they will not prevent ships from entering Canadian waters for safety reasons.

Lawyers who visited the detained migrants yesterday said they survived desperate conditions during about 100 days at sea. They described living on just one litre of water a week and having to gather rain water to boil for tea. Gary Anandasangaree, a lawyer representing the Canadian Tamil Congress, said those he met were teachers, engineers, journalists, fishermen, farmers and businessmen. Some had visible wounds suffered during

the country's civil war, including a journalist who had been shot, he said. Most had been in displaced persons camps inside Sri Lanka and complained of being harassed by the victorious army, Mr. Anandasangere added.

"The journey was an absolutely horrendous experience. Conditions were deplorable. Nobody in their right mind would put their child through that unless there was a good reason," said immigration lawyer Robert Blanshay.

The first detention review hearing for those seeking refugee status began behind closed doors in Vancouver on Monday, with the media barred from the proceedings until at least Tuesday.

Leeann King, the adjudicator of the Immigration and Refugee Board, is to issue a ruling on Tuesday morning on whether the media will be allowed to attend the hearings for all of the detained migrants.

Those detained must get a hearing within 48 hours to examine the legality of their detention, or failing that, as soon as possible.

Both Canada and Sri Lanka have raised fears that some of the migrants may be linked to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, which has been banned in Canada as a terrorist organization and that the organizers of the voyage are terrorist supporters who stand to make millions of dollars in profits by organizing ocean trips like that of the MV Sun Sea.

The Canadian Tamil Congress said it has great concerns with the Sri Lankan government's agenda and the quality of the information that Colombo would provide.

"We ask the Canadian government to be cautious around the information provided by the Sri Lankan government," Manjula Selvarajah of the Canadian Tamil Congress said.

The situation has not devolved into a political crisis, but the federal government will have to tread carefully to deal with the current group of migrants, as well as future ones.

All parties agree that Canada cannot turn away ships, but the opposition is ready to jump on any hint that the Conservative government is mistreating legitimate refugee claimants. Liberal MP Bob Rae accused Mr. Toews of "playing to the crowd" by insisting that terrorists and criminals may have been on the Sun Sea.

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