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189 migrants still in local prisons; Tamil boat people were brought to Maple Ridge facilities for processing.

Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows Times

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There was concern when the MV Sun Sea from Sri Lanka arrived in B.C. that the influx of the Tamil migrants into the local prisons would make an already crowded system even more so.

Dean Purdy, chairman of the Corrections and Sheriff's Services Unit of the B.C. Government Employees Union, said the arrival of the Tamil migrants increased capacity of the jails that were already running close to 200 per cent above capacity before.

"It made conditions inside the jail pretty tense," he said. "It made the job of a correctional officer even more difficult."

While Purdy said the local prisons are still overcrowded, B.C. Corrections said they are "providing an environment that is as safe, secure and comfortable as possible for the detainees while they are being processed by federal authorities."

A ministry spokesperson said "migrants have had access to spiritual services, day-to-day medical attention and counselling where possible."

Refugee hearings for the migrants started in August and 279 migrants have been released to date by the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA).

A spokesperson for the agency said they are "exercising due diligence in the screening of all irregular migrants for both security and criminal threats."

CBSA has the authority to authorize release from detention, but a spokesperson said they "detain when appropriate and argue continued detention of those individuals deemed to be a security risk, danger to the public, whose identity can not be determined, or those who CBSA believes will not appear for subsequent processing if released."

They would not comment on individual cases, but each migrant's case will proceed in accordance with facts specific to that person, and terms and conditions for their release are decided by the Immigration and Refugee Board.

Currently, there are 180 Tamil men at the Fraser Regional Correctional Centre in Maple Ridge, and nine women at the Alouette Correctional Centre.

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