

B.C. jail officials caught flat-footed by Tamil migrant ship

Despite knowing for weeks that a migrant ship was on its way, B.C. jail officials still scrambled last summer to accommodate hundreds of Tamil detainees upon their arrival, memos and briefing notes show.

The documents, obtained through a Access to Information request by a Carleton University researcher, reveal that in the days following the MV Sun Sea's arrival Aug. 13, officials were still in the throes of installing sleeper trailers, office trailers, washrooms, fences and electrical and plumbing lines at the Fraser Regional Correctional Centre east of Vancouver, where 380 Tamil men were held.

Nearly 100 of them were put in the jail's gym in the first few days until sleeping quarters were finished. Others were squeezed into units with triple or quadruple bunks.

Jail staff also had to deal with an onslaught of federal workers assigned to interview the Tamils and medical personnel tasked with getting blood samples and running X-rays.

"There are probably about five or six separate agencies and or medical personnel that require the detainees for one thing or another," Steve DiCastri, the jail's warden, wrote on Aug. 19. "It became frustrating for staff, however the issues were worked through."

The wave of new inmates put a strain on support staff, such as cooks, and disrupted regular inmates' routines. Some were forced to move temporarily out of their sleeping quarters to make room for the migrants, while others were denied temporarily yard and workout privileges.

Jail officials strove to make the migrants comfortable, changing the menu, for instance, after learning that they were "sick of rice," the documents show. Staff provided migrants with sandals, phone cards and television access. An outside service was contracted to wash the migrants' clothes.

"Some of the detainees were give (sic) lessons on how to use a toilet and brush their teeth," a memo read. "Many are fascinated on how the toilet works."

Seven months later, fewer than 70 Tamil migrants remain in custody; one was ordered deported this week. The rest are waiting for their refugee claims to be heard.

Federal officials have warned that more migrant ships could be on their way.

The Harper government has said it hopes to deter such mass arrivals with its anti-smuggling bill, which proposes tougher penalties against smugglers and more restrictions on migrants who use them.

But Justin Piche, a postgraduate student in Carleton University's sociology and anthropology department, said he doubts the bill will dissuade those who are desperate to leave their country and added he's concerned by a provision in the bill that would allow some asylum-seekers to be detained for up to a year.

"I don't think the government has necessarily thought how the implementation component of this legislation would work in practice," Piche said. "You have no room to put these people."

Dean Purdy, a spokesman for the union representing B.C. corrections officers, said even though jail staff adapted to the situation last summer, it was still a "logistical nightmare."

The Fraser Regional Correctional Centre was built for 254 inmates and had almost twice that number even before the Tamils arrived.

"Everything was happening so fast," he said, adding there were concerns workers were getting burned out.

Any disruption to regular inmates' daily routines is also cause for concern, he said.

A spokesperson for B.C.'s ministry of public safety said Wednesday in an email that the province has "extensive experience in managing large numbers of migrants for extended periods of time" and regularly trains staff to respond to a number of scenarios.

"We have experienced these sudden influxes before and we always seek to learn from them and build on our operational response."

In June 2010, the B.C. Corrections Branch signed an agreement with the Canada Border Services Agency to detain — at the federal government's request — migrants who fall under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act. In return, the federal government agreed to reimburse the province \$190 per day for each person in custody.

A provincial briefing note prepared prior to the Sun Sea's arrival stated that jail staff were confident they could "quickly ramp up to an effective state of readiness." The same memo noted that, in 2000, the province took in about 400 Asian migrants who had arrived on several boats.

Still, they faced challenges, the documents show.

"The large trailer placements have been very challenging and costly," DiCastrì, the warden, wrote in one memo. "We have had to engage a large crane to lift and place the sleeper units in to place as the transport trucks are unable to turn in to the rear yard areas."

Another briefing note stated that Red Cross and United Nations workers visited the facility that day and "raised the issue" of migrants being housed in the gym. However, after staff explained their plans to move the migrants from the gym and provide them time for exercise and fresh air, "both agencies were completely fine with our plan."

By Aug. 19, accommodations seemed to be complete.

"The last of the detainee sleeper units are complete and the two large washroom cars for them are also in and hooked up ready for use," a memo read.