

Migrants probed for links to crime

Two pregnant women, one baby among 8 hospitalized

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After months spent crammed into a cargo ship for a painstaking journey across the sea, hundreds of Sri Lankan men, women and children arrived in British Columbia on Friday under heavy security, and were quickly met by accusations that human-smugglers and terrorists are in their midst.

Canadian authorities, after boarding the MV Sun Sea on Thursday night, brought the 59-metre vessel into Esquimalt Harbour, near Victoria, on Friday morning, where "processing" began for the estimated 400 men, 60 women and 30 children on board.

Several ambulances ferried some passengers to a Victoria hospital, where they were to be checked out by doctors, but it appears many of the migrants are much healthier than initially believed.

Only eight were taken to hospital -- including two pregnant women, a six-month-old baby and one other child -- and none were seriously ill.

Security screening prevented a clear view of how many people were exiting from the ambulances as they started arriving in the late morning, but the cries of young children could be heard behind the security fence.

"That's the shame of it," said one of those watching behind the police tape as screams from what sounded like at least two toddlers built in volume.

While officials hurried to deal with the newly arrived mass of humanity on the ground, the federal government was taking a tough line against the migrant ship, even as reports surfaced that two more such vessels might be on their way to Canada.

Public Safety Minister Vic Toews told reporters every person from the Thai ship will be assessed individually to ensure they are not engaged in criminal activity, including human smuggling.

"Officials from the Canada Border Services Agency will take the time necessary to identify and process individuals aboard the Sun Sea in accordance with Canadian law," Toews said.

"Any individuals who endanger national security or who have engaged in the criminal enterprise of human-smuggling will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law."

Toews said authorities suspect Sri Lankan members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, or Tamil Tigers -- a group branded a terrorist organization by the Canadian government and banned from entering the country -- were aboard the ship.

Human smuggling was one way the Tamil Tigers funded their 25-year war with the Sri Lankan government, a conflict that claimed tens of thousands of lives. The Tigers were crushed in a final May 2009 assault amid accusations of war crimes on both sides.

"This particular situation we believe to be part of a larger human-smuggling and human trafficking enterprise," Toews said. "Our goal is not to stall or stop political refugees, or refugees generally. Our goal is to ensure that our refugee system is not hijacked by criminals or terrorists."

Liberal MP Keith Martin accused the Conservatives of playing "fast and loose" with the term terrorist, to the detriment of legitimate refugees aboard the cargo ship.

"The feds are using the migrants as a straw man to make themselves look strong," said Martin.

"Toews loves to talk about this boat being filled with terrorists and human traffickers. But if you're a trafficker you don't get on a boat and spend three months risking your life on a filthy, crowded boat."

International law prevents Canada from simply turning away would-be refugees from its shores.

The vast majority of the asylum-seekers are adult men who are expected to be held at a local jail for processing, before being moved to B.C.'s Lower Mainland, said Dean Purdy, spokesman for correctional and sheriff services with the B.C. Government Employees Union.

Processing, which mostly involves determining identity and background, was expected to take between 48 and 72 hours.

Purdy said he was told 400 of the 490 on board the ship are adult men, with about 60 women and the remaining 30 children.

Those on board are expected to seek refugee status in Canada under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act. Under that law, claimants can be detained for a variety of reasons, including a lack of proper ID or concerns about public safety. When detained, they are entitled to a hearing before the Immigration and Refugee Board within two days, and then every seven days afterward.

The Sun Sea is the second Tamil refugee ship to arrive in Canada in the past year.

In October, the Ocean Lady, a rusting cargo ship carrying 76 Tamils, was intercepted by HMCS Regina and docked at Ogden Point, in Victoria.

Despite claims that 25 of those on board were Tamil Tigers, there was no evidence.

Most are now living in Toronto.