

OPINION

Close the camps in Sri Lanka

Editorial
The Star

SRI Lanka's postwar human exodus is washing up on faraway shores: Hundreds of Tamils have reached Indonesia and Australia, and others apparently are being drawn here. While authorities are still investigating, the Canadian Tamil Congress says 76 men from the merchant ship *Ocean Lady* off the British Columbia coast are Tamil refugees.

"Sri Lanka has become hell for Tamils and they have to get out," says Congress spokesperson David Poopalapillai. Others who fled to Indonesia have made the startling claim that they are facing "genocide."

While that strains belief, the Sri Lankan military continues to hold some 260,000 Tamils in detention camps, in poor conditions, five months after shattering the Tamil Tiger insurgency in mid-May. The government says only some 30,000 have been sent home. Tension in the camps is reportedly reaching the boiling point.

The centres are miserable, overcrowded, and short on fresh water and sanitation. The impending monsoon season threatens to disrupt food deliveries, flood tents, spread sewage and ruin drinking water. That raises the spectre of dysentery, typhoid and other diseases.

After fighting eased, the Colombo government promised

camps would be closed in six months. Clearly, that is not going to happen.

It should come as no surprise that some people will be tempted to flee a country that is so slow to heal its wounds.

That leaves Canada and other countries of asylum in a fix. More Tamils are bound to flee if they can't live normal lives. We can either grant them asylum, or ship them back to a clouded future. The better course would be for President Mahinda Rajapakse to close the camps, restore normalcy and make flight a less desirable option.

While Sri Lanka has been battered by the war, it is not without resources. Colombo has a \$2.6 billion International Monetary Fund loan. It has also received \$225 million for the camps, and it has appealed for "much, much more." If it wants that extra help, it will have to speed up resettlement. Canada, which is giving \$22.5 million in aid this year, will not willingly subsidize detention centres.

In the meantime officials should give the refugees a sympathetic hearing. Some would "draw the line" against taking in the refugees. But provided that they are not Tiger leaders, they should be entitled to temporary sanctuary until Sri Lanka finds a humane way to deal with people displaced by the fighting.

Sri Lanka's defeat of the Tigers should lead to national reconciliation, not indefinite internment.



Many Tamils are fleeing the country because a perilous journey offers more hope than life in Sri Lanka

It's deja vu as 'those people' still cry for help

Lyn Bender
The Age

I AM suffering flashbacks of my time at Woomera Detention Centre. Not as a detainee, but as a psychologist and part of the medical team employed to cover contractual requirements to "manage" the psychological needs of asylum seekers.

These needs were expressed through hunger strikes, severe depression, suicide attempts and the trauma of children. It strikes me as incredible that again boat arrivals prompt the regression to ignoring and violating the human rights of people who are seeking to flee persecution.

The old clichés are being invoked to justify a harsh and cruel response to the plight of desperate people. They roll smoothly off the tongue, the old biased assertions. These people who get on boats. These people who bring their children here.

Those people who threw their children overboard are now the people who burn their boats and who smile and take vitamins in luxurious accommodation on Christmas Island.

The discrediting myths and insinuations are being reconfigured like retro fashion apparel.

There was a Swedish language test, now discredited, designed to discredit refugees' claims to be from Afghanistan through analysis of their accents and words. Yes, it does sound like a joke, but it produced bizarre and dreadful outcomes.

The Bakhtiyari family, Afghans whom I had supported in Woomera, were eventually deported to Pakistan on the strength of this evidence. They had to find their way back to Afghanistan, without appropriate papers.

Refugees are required to fit a stereotype. Alex, the Sri Lankan spokesman on the boat at the centre of the latest dispute, has been criticised for his articulate and American-accented speech.

Amid laments for the loss of the "Pacific Solution", the emerging "Asian co-operation" is being offered as the new hope for our fears regarding permeable borders that the hoards will cross. Semantically, it is an improvement.

The "Pacific Solution" was a term that had an unfortunate consonance with the "Final Solution". Co-operation with our Asian neighbours conjures a warm sense of bonding.

It thinly disguises the sinister reality. These people are being pushed back to a nation that is not a signatory to the UN convention on refugees.

Australia is a signatory to the convention, which defines a refugee as "a person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country".

It also requires that "states shall not expel or return ('refouler') a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership or a particular social group or political opinion".

As the debate over boat arrivals and people smugglers intensifies I find myself suffering from acute deja vu. These echoes of history do not just reach back to the Tampa. They recall 1939. After sailing from Hamburg, the *Saint Louis* sat in the dock in

Havana while the US refused refuge to more than 900 Jews fleeing Nazi persecution. They were sent back and half of those asylum seekers died in concentration camps. Out of this and other similar situations the Geneva Convention of 1951 was born.

In 2002 I was employed as a psychologist in Woomera Detention Centre and was a daily witness to the distress of detainees.

Late at night I watched the television news as the politicians denigrated and disparaged these people as "queue jumpers" and "illegals". In truth there was no orderly bureaucratic process possible in the countries from which they fled - mostly Saddam's Iraq, and the Taliban's Afghanistan and now Tamils fleeing fear of genocide in Sri Lanka.

We split our awareness. On the one hand we daily absorb and decry the horror stories in far off lands. On the other we shoo and push away those who flee these impossible situations as we might unwanted stray dogs. This is defined as being tough and humane. There is blame and denigration to justify these actions. Our fear of engulfment and of difference dooms asylum seekers to suffering and death.

The most common refrains after the exposure of atrocities have been "we didn't know" or "how could this happen?"

But now we do know. According to the UNHCR there are 15.2 million refugees worldwide. Poorer countries bear the burden of these numbers, in the millions, while in Australia only 4750 people sought asylum in 2008.

We need to do our fair share of resettlement. Climate change may result in even more displaced persons. We must find genuine compassionate responses for a worldwide problem.

Lyn Bender is a psychologist.

Treat Tamil asylum seekers by the book

Edmonton Journal

CANADA'S immigration minister is talking tough over the disposition of 76 Sri Lankan men intercepted off the Canadian coast. He told reporters the government is determined prevent the appearance and reality of a two-tiered immigration system - one for those who play by the rules, the other for illegals who attempt to sneak in. Most citizens will heartily agree with that sentiment.

But the conditions in Sri Lanka that created business opportunities for the smugglers continue to exacerbate the situation. The Sinhalese Sri Lankan

leadership had promised to quickly free some 250,000 Tamils held in appalling detention camps, winnowing out the most dangerous Tiger hardcore types from civilians. But the process has become bogged down, with few reductions in recent months.

On the other hand, neither should the Canadian government be allowed to manipulate human tragedy in search of popularity points. Like or not, we have - and must have - a process for dealing with asylum-seekers.

Their cases must be dealt with individually and fairly, whether they paid criminals to reach our shores or not.

(Edited for space)