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Deportation means death, says Tamil

By MARIANNE ACKERMAN
of The Gazette

Eighteen months ago, Tamil political activist Yogasampather Murugesu arrived at Mirabel airport in search of asylum from his native Sri Lanka, where he spent 2½ years in jail without being charged with a crime.

Today, Murugesu is still in jail, this time the Parthenais detention centre. He's awaiting results of his final hearing before the Canadian Immigration Appeal Board.

"The police back home want to kill me," Murugesu, 40, said in a recent interview. "If I go back home, it's the end."

An active member of the separatist Tamil minority currently in a bloody conflict with the ruling Sinhalese people, Murugesu says a leading Tamil party member warned him of the threat to his life and urged him to flee the country.

Hundred of Tamils have already been killed in rioting in Sri Lanka and thousand more have been left homeless.

Most would-be political refugees are free during the appeal process, but Immigration Canada has judged Murugesu "dangerous to the public" based on criminal convictions between 1966 and 1974 in Sri Lanka, and charges of murdering a Sinhalese policeman.

He was jailed on suspicion of the crime but after intense pressure from family and friends, was released when police could produce no evidence or witnesses.

Warrant issued

When the Royal Canadian Mounted Police asked for details last year, Sri Lankan police issued a warrant for Murugesu's arrest.

Immigration Canada has accepted the Sri Lankan police report. "A refugee is usually a victim of injustice, not justice," said official Pierre Fallu.

The appeal board rejected Murugesu's first bid for refugee status, but a Federal Court of Appeal ordered the case reopened.

For staff at Parthenais and for

Sri Lankan communities across North America, the soft-spoken jack-of-all trades has become a cause celebre.

Guards, social workers and the jail chaplain at Parthenais signed a petition testifying to Murugesu's good character.

"Sam is a very gentle person," says Rev. Pierre Charbot, who organized the statement from Parthenais staff in time for Murugesu's hearing in May. "He's always smiling, or trying to help out. Everybody likes him."

Ninety-nine Sri Lankans in Canada signed a statement attesting to his political activities and their belief in his innocence.

Friends raise \$7,200

Dr. Elagu Elaguppillai, a senior adviser to the Atomic Energy Control Board who was born in Sri Lanka, learned of his countryman's plight last fall.

He quickly helped raise \$7,200 toward bail from Sri Lankans in Canada and the U.S., but Immigration Canada requires a deposit of \$15,000 before considering bail.

When Elaguppillai visited the island country on family business last July, he made inquiries about Murugesu's criminal convictions.

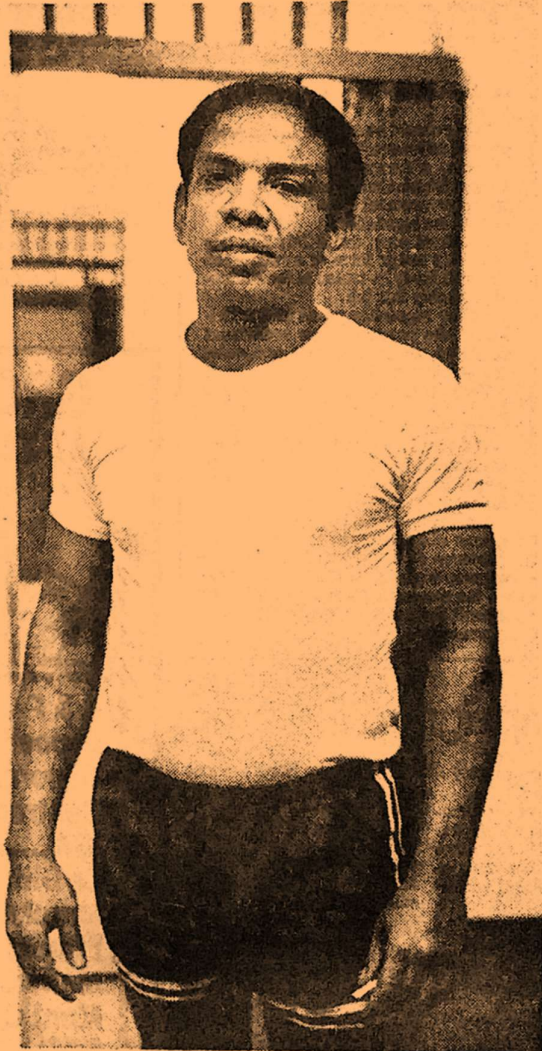
"The boy has a very strong personality but I am convinced that in every case, the charges against him can be traced back to politics," he said. "He's not a dangerous fellow."

On Sept. 29, Murugesu's lawyer, Melvin Weigel, will reopen the case to enter as evidence details of violence which erupted last summer between separatist Tamils and the Sinhalese majority.

Hundreds were killed in the riots and thousands left homeless. Many Tamils fled, a few hundred to Canada.

"Murugesu came at a time when very little was known here about the problems of Sri Lanka," said Weigel.

"His initial story seemed garbled. The police thought he was lying, but he has lived a crazy experience."



Gazette, Richard Arless Jr.

Yogasampather Murugesu: Held in Parthenais jail.