

Violent few hurting our name, Tamils say

By Allan Thompson
TORONTO STAR

Refugees from Sri Lanka who fled to Canada to escape the turmoil back home now fear a different kind of violence here: armed gangs in their own community.

Many are afraid the increasingly violent clashes between rival youth gangs — conflicts that have already claimed one life — will create a sub-culture of violence in an otherwise peaceful community.

As newcomers trying to make their way in Canada, they are also afraid the actions of a few will result in their community being branded as violent and troublesome.

"Out of a community of maybe 95,000 I don't think there are more than 100 people involved in this kind of crime," said Subramaniam Rajaratnam, a director of the Tamil Eelam Society of Canada, a broadly based community group active in providing settlement services to newcomers.

"But those 100 people are spoiling the reputation of our community and we are asking the police to get tough with them," Rajaratnam said.

In recent months, there have been a number of shootings in Metro allegedly involving members of the Tamil community.

The most recent occurred May 2, resulting in the death of a 23-year-old man: Sivapiragasam Namasivayam of Vancouver died from gunshot wounds to the head and chest after a skirmish outside a house party in Scarborough's Bridletown Circle and Warden Ave. area. No arrests have been made.

In other incidents:

□ On April 26, two gunmen injured five in a

shooting spree in a Scarborough restaurant. A week earlier, rival gangs clashed in front of the same restaurant, exchanging gunfire.

□ On March 28, there was a shootout on the sidewalk outside a Scarborough food store, injuring a man.

□ Tamil journalist David Jeyaraj was assaulted Feb. 15 with baseball bats and metal rods outside the Ontario Science Centre.

Community leaders want Canadians to know such incidents are not examples of the Sri Lankan war being played out on a Canadian stage.

"It's not politics; it's crime, just plain crime," said Vairamuthu Pūvanachandran, another director of the Tamil Eelam Society.

"Whoever is violating Canadian law and order must be punished. We are not going to defend them or support them. They are spoiling our name and we are very sad about that."

There are between 75,000 and 100,000 Sri Lankans living in Metro. The majority are Tamils granted refugee status during the past decade.

Tamil guerrillas, led by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam movement in the north and east of the island nation formerly known as Ceylon, have been waging an armed separatist struggle against the government since 1983. The struggle between the guerrillas and government has been marked by atrocities on both sides.

Those who have fled that violence to settle in Canada are eager to leave the turmoil behind.

"We are people who have left the land of our birth and suffered all these problems of

transplanting ourselves here only because this country offers us a kind of peaceful existence," said journalist Jeyaraj, editor of the Metro-based Tamil weekly newspaper, *Senthamarai*.

"But there is violence in this community and we can see it escalating from fisticuffs to baseball bats, to steel bars to guns, shooting at people and now to killing people," he said.

About 200 members of the Sri Lankan community met with senior officers at Metro police headquarters early this month.

But police are also wary of being seen to support sensational media reports of a terrorized community, rife with violence.

"Crime in the Tamil community is no different than any other crime. It's just that we're trying to nip it in the bud," said Metro police Inspector Roy Teeft of 55 Division.

Indeed, some Tamils who spoke up at the meeting wondered what all the fuss was about. And some community leaders criticized the media for what they see as sensational and inaccurate reports that make Tamils look bad.

But journalists such as Jeyaraj say there's no point shooting the messenger.

"Like those who go to Alcoholics Anonymous, members of our community must first face up to the fact that there is a problem."

Accepting the fact that there is a problem is one thing. Explaining it is another.

While most emphasize the violence is not directly related to the military struggle in Sri Lanka, others admit there can be no denying that the brutality experienced daily in Sri Lanka must play a role among maladjusted youths now living in Canada.