

Tamil Nadu government in touch with Centre to legally handle influx of Sri Lankan refugees, says CM

So far, 16 refugees have arrived in the state as the island nation is facing its worst economic crisis.

Scroll Staff

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Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin. | [MK Stalin/Twitter screengrab](#)

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin on Thursday said that his government is in touch with the Centre to legally handle the influx of refugees from Sri Lanka, reported PTI.

“The Tamil Nadu government will strive to ensure a new dawn to the Lankan Tamils,” he told the state Assembly.

Sri Lanka is facing its worst economic crisis since independence in 1948 and several citizens of the country are fleeing the island nation.

Depleted foreign reserves are driving the crisis, resulting in devaluation of its currency. This has adversely affected payments for essential imports such as food, medicine and fuel. Due to the shortage, prices of essential items have increased sharply in the island country.

So far, 16 [Sri Lankan refugees](#) have reached Tamil Nadu this week, according to *The News Minute*.

On Wednesday, a Rameswaram court sent three of the [refugees](#) to 15-day judicial custody at Puzhal central prison near Chennai, reported *The New Indian Express*. However, later in the day, the state government decided to accommodate the other refugees at the Mandapam camp in Rameswaram municipality area of Ramanathapuram district.

“We have asked authorities to keep such people at Rameswaram refugee camp,” said Commissioner of Rehabilitation and Welfare of Non-Resident Tamils Jacintha Lazarus. “Inquiry will be done at the camp itself.”

The three Sri Lankans were sent to prison as India does not have a refugee law. “Only Standard Operating Procedures are issued by Ministry of Home Affairs to deal with [foreign nationals](#) in India, who claim to be refugees,” the Union government had said in 2016.

Madurai-based advocate T Lajapathi Roy told *The New Indian Express* that this is because India is not part of the United Nation convention on refugees.

“Since there is no existing protocol, such people are being considered as illegal immigrants,” Roy said. “During the Sri Lankan Civil War, India accommodated refugees on humanitarian grounds.”

This, however, does not mean that the [refugees are not protected](#) in the country.

All people living within the borders of India, including foreigners, migrants, refugees, have rights under Article 14 (equality before law) and Article 21 (right to life and liberty) of the Constitution. These are available for all people, whether they are citizens or foreigners or whether they are legally inside the country or not.

Meanwhile, experts told *The News Minute* that the Indian government would have to assess the extent of refugee influx from Sri Lanka into Tamil Nadu and decide on its next course of action.

“Immigration comes under the Union list and unfortunately the state government will have no say when it comes to formulating policies dealing with the new wave of economic migrants from Sri Lanka,” said Sathiya Moorthy, an expert on Sri Lankan refugee crisis. “It will be left to the Union government.”

Henri Tiphagne, executive director of human rights organisation People’s Watch, told *The News Minute* that booking the refugees and putting them in prison amounts to human rights violations.

“I have been closely working with Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees, who fled the ethnic conflict in the 1990s,” Tiphagne said. “They were put up in the Mandapam camps, and fed, their children were sent to schools and they were allowed to work. The state government even set up a State Bank of India counter for the migrants to exchange their currency to the Indian rupee.”

He alleged that the manner in which the Tamil Nadu government was treating the refugees now was drastically different.

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