Journalistic Integrity: MIA in the USA

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by Ruvani Seneviratne Freeman Perhaps it is the fact that Barack Obama appeared slightly stunned when Bono mentioned the people of Palestine right alongside the people of Israel during the ‘We Are One,’ concert on the mall during inauguration. Or that he couldn’t parlay the million-voiced roar of approval from the assembled into anything resembling a hope for peace in Gaza or the West Bank. Either way, the American media has been awash with a convenient amnesia regarding the ongoing massacre of Palestinians and American ineffectuality in the region, and a new found enthusiasm for throwing the word "genocide" at the Sri Lankan government.

Of these, the Boston Globe appears to be the leader of the band. First there was the editorial on February 4th entitled ‘The Anguish of Sri Lanka,’ where it accused the Sri Lankan government of a scorched-earth offensive and called for the Obama administration to ask for a UN Security Council resolution calling for a cease-fire, and for Asian powers providing military assistance to Sri Lanka – China, India and Pakistan – to exert pressure on the Sri Lankan government to stop the military exercise. That would be, I’m assuming, right after the Obama administration asks Israel to abide by, heed, or just acknowledge the 268 UN resolutions concerning its actions against Palestinians? Or, if that is too many, maybe that last one, UN resolution 1860, part 5 of which states that the UN "Condemns all violence and hostilities directed against civilians and all acts of terrorism" by Israel? Then again, this is not something the Obama administration can ask for since the US abstained on that vote. The Globe ran another article on February 12th, about a Massachusetts teenager, Priya Suntharalingam, who is fasting – American style, i.e. with the help of Gatorade, water and vitamins no less! – to bring attention to "the plight of Tamils in Sri Lanka." Apparently, the Suntharalingams moved to Boston in 1989 and soon rose to prominence within the Boston Tamil Association, Priya Suntharalingam’s source for all information pertaining to Sri Lanka, the place she calls the motherland, even though she has only visited it once, at the age of 14 for a wedding! But source is of no concern to the Globe, which chose instead to highlight the shenanigans of a child over doing some research of its own. On February 15th, the Globe went further with the salaciously titled ‘Genocide in Sri Lanka,’ by Bruce Fein. According to Mr. Fein, who has, by his account, delivered a 1000 page document to Eric Holder, President Obama’s U.S. Attorney General, claiming that there is a re-enactment of "the Bosnian Srebrenica genocide of more than 7,000 Muslims…Sri Lanka’s armed forces employed indiscriminate bombing and shelling to herd 350,000 Tamil civilians into a government-prescribed "safety zone," a euphemism for Tamil killing fields." Fein, a former deputy attorney-general during the Reagan administration, claims that the "State Department lists Sri Lanka as an investigatory target in the Office of War Crimes," but forgets to mention that the same State Department lists the LTTE as a terrorist organization, moved to freeze the assets of LTTE operatives here in the United States and, by the way, shut down funding from Americans and Canadians to the LTTE, all moves which forced the LTTE to suddenly begin peace talks in 2002. But how can a syndicate like the Boston Globe be blamed when that bastion of independent media, PBS (Peoples’ Broadcasting Service), was used by Tavis Smiley, to share television time (I cannot call it an interview since an interview involves research and preparation and insightful questions on the part of the interviewer, none of which were forthcoming from Smiley), with Mathangi Arulpragasam, the Sri Lankan born rapper, known to the world as MIA. Arulpragasam is the niece of Prabhakaran. This simple fact alone ought to have prepared Mr. Smiley for what was coming. But that would have required that he knew to whom he was giving a platform, and he, like most Americans, did not. Smiley, an African American TV personality, who abandoned an unsuccessful political career to take up radio shows, is known for his views on race and politics, particularly institutional racism. He has won awards and the attention of editors at Newsweek, The Washington Post, Time, and networks such as MSNBC, ABC and CNN where he appears as a political commentator. Smiley has, throughout his career, left a path strewn with ill feeling and political expediency. The last time he was in the national spotlight was for incensing vast tracts of America by criticizing Barack Obama for not being "black enough" for him and for campaigning in Texas and Ohio days before the primaries, instead of meeting with him! Smiley has a history of refusing to discuss an issue (he got his mother on the airwaves to lead a prayer that condemned the gay community), but rather pontificating and finding scapegoats where there are none. Little wonder then that MIA was allowed to make statements such as that the LTTE is just a harmless group of Tamils, (not a militant terrorist organization), with no sophisticated military and which could be wiped out with a sneeze, and that the Sri Lankan government was attempting to make Tamil people "extinct" in Sri Lanka! According to Arulpragasam, Tamils weren’t being "allowed to live" in Sri Lanka! Last I checked, and thanks to the flood of protests received by the station by viewers from around the world, PBS’ ombudsman, Michael Getler published a public apology for Smiley’s performance, including the statement that there is no evidence, nor has any international media units, or humanitarian organization, described the current war against the LTTE as genocide, and that none of "the reporting agencies one usually looks to for such judgment has made that judgment." The Executive Producer of the Tavis Smiley show, however, Neal Kendall, has refused to respond even to Michael Getler’s request that he address the criticism of Smiley. Today, thanks to intense international pressure and the concerted efforts of Sinhalese and Tamil Sri Lankans resident in the US, Tavis Smiley has been forced to do a follow up with Dr. Palitha Kohona, Sri Lanka’s Foreign Secretary as well as Ravi Nessman, the Associated Press Bureau Chief domiciled in Colombo. The more pertinent fact is how easily the American media can be hijacked and hoodwinked by any minority group around the world and made to espouse a cause, no matter how misguided or unjustifiable it is. There is a new TV show called Lie To Me, poised to take America by storm. It highlights the work of Dr. Paul Ekman, the scientist who pioneered the detection of deception through the process of reading the human face, body and voice. Those who have learned the art use it in criminal investigations. Those of us who have a human being’s innate ability to detect a lie, would have had no problem figuring out Arulpragasam’s performance. Someone personally affected by the conditions of an entire

people being prevented from living and breathing, as she claimed, subject to genocide, no less, does not sit back on national TV, flip her hair and make a series of jokes in the same breath! Genocide is a big word and you don’t unleash it without giving up all the oxygen to it and it alone. But the problem is that Arulpragasam has an album to sell and she has moved to the land of selling, via Hounslow, Chennai, Jaffna, London and now resides in Bedford-Stuyvesant, in Brooklyn, New York. There was a time when MIA could not get a visa to visit the United States, when she refused to add a disclaimer against terrorism to her albums. As blogged by Manish on the website Sepia Mutiny, "Arulpragasam doesn’t downplay her Tiger connection, she flaunts it, it’s integral to her marketing. She did a mix album using unauthorized samples called Piracy Funds Terrorism. Her song ‘Sunshowers’ refers to suicide bombs (‘And some showers I’ll be aiming at you’), her first album bears her dad’s [LTTE] codename. Jungle guerrillas are all over the ‘Sunshowers’ video, there’s a large running tiger in her excellent concert visuals, she does a soldier step on stage." But now she fits right in. It could have been eight years of George Bush. Or it could be that the whole matter of Bush was such an embarrassment to this country, and the difficulty of the ongoing embrace of Israel so hard to turn a blind eye to now, with the coming of Obama, that America needs to stir up a controversy about an island the size of Maine. Sri Lanka could say "hello pot, I’m kettle" to the American journalists who give credence to propagandists such as Fein, Smiley and Arulpragasam. Except that both pot and kettle are plum roles and two biggies are already cast in the lead: the United States and Israel. Ru S. Freeman’s creative and political writing has appeared internationally. Her debut novel, A Disobedient Girl will be published in the US and Canada by Atria/Simon & Schuster in July, 2009, by Viking in the UK and in translation in Italy, Israel, Taiwan, Brazil and the Netherlands. She lives in Bala Cynwyd, PA.Courtesy: Island.lk