
The Best of British Blogs

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The latest critique of Sri Lanka in the London Telegraph, in what is termed a blog by one of its Foreign Correspondents, Peter Foster, continues with misinformation based on what it terms a 'veteran international aid worker'. The diatribe goes far to explain why such self-appointed guardians of morality are thought to be concerned more with their personal agendas than the work they are paid to do.

Foster begins by saying there are 200,000 civilians trapped in the conflict zone, while the Sri Lankan government says there are 100,000. Foster is caught in a time warp clearly, for the government says 70,000 while even the UN has now begun to scale down its figures, and in a meeting on the 25th recorded that they thought there were between 70,000 and 100,000 civilians in the safe area. Of course Foster's veteran may know better, as young John Campbell whom Foster quotes later on thought he did, when he pronounced on the BBC. But Foster, as a diplomatic correspondent, ought to surely – unless he thought blogging did not require high journalistic standards – have checked with senior staff. In the case of Campbell, the UN decided to send him away, to prevent further embarrassment, after he claimed to the BBC that the situation in Sri Lanka was as bad as that in Somalia. Foster claims that 'relations between the Sri Lankan government and the United Nations are strained on the ground'. That is certainly not the case, but Foster's sources are obviously doing their best to poison relations. The veteran complains of what he terms 'foot-dragging when it comes to meeting its humanitarian obligations' on the part of the Sri Lankan government, and 'compares that with the LTTE shooting at fleeing civilians' in saying that a democratically elected government should do better. Obviously the man has no sense of proportion whatsoever. But the government has to be careful. Foster obviously does not know of the several occasions on which UN staff members and other workers for aid agencies were found transporting weapons and concealing them in their homes. These may have been relatively innocent civilians forced into subservience by ruthless Tigers, but that argument will not help the civilians who might fall victim to such terrorist activity. The UN chief in Colombo has twice expressed to me his worries when informed of these difficulties, and has also been grateful to the Sri Lankan government for dealing with these incidents on a case by case basis and not treating the whole UN as suspect. But that is precisely why the UN, at more responsible levels, accepts the need for checks, while Foster's veteran, and the callow young Campbell, who had evidently enjoyed playing God in Somalia, after an earlier stint in the British army, obviously cannot understand what a true sense of responsibility means in a very different sort of situation. Foster's veteran is horrified that UN vehicles and staff were searched, and claims that the Serbs in Kosovo in 1998 were not so disrespectful of international UN staff. But it is precisely because of the malign gullibility of people like Campbell and the unnamed veteran, who might carry what they think humanitarian messages for their staff and friends, that the searches have to be thorough. And if these pontificating imbeciles think that such checks prevent an effective aid-operation, they have obviously learnt nothing of reality and forgotten nothing about their precious status. Foster then goes on to claim that pro-Tamil groups want Sri Lanka censured at the UN but China and Russia will veto such efforts – obviously he has forgotten the claim that an attack on Iraq would be prevented by Chinese and Russian vetoes, which is why the UN was circumvented then, and forgotten too that Mr. Bush, with Mr. Blair tagging along, ignored that they could not even get a simple majority for their evil design, and therefore used simple sanctimoniousness to justify their invasion of Iraq. But Foster doubtless still thinks that Telegraph readers will get collywobbles if Russia and China are mentioned. Foster believes that the claims of some Tamil groups that the Sri Lankan government is engaged in genocide are 'given a certain amount of force by the apparent reluctance of the Sri Lankan government to be more transparent and co-operative with international agencies as it conducts its war'. Since the only evidence he produces for genocide is the checks which his sources resent, he must have almost as perverse a sense of his obligation to the truth as those who precipitated the attack on Iraq, which President Obama, who understands where real challenges from terrorism lie, is now trying to recover from. Foster then changes the terms of debate by wondering what sort of 'post-War settlement the right-wing Sinhalese government of Mahinda Rajapakse intends to impose on Sri Lanka's Tamils'. I am not sure what Foster means by right-wing, since another recent attack on Sri Lanka with regard to genocide was by a genuinely right-wing group which used openness to trade as one of its criteria with regard to genocide. Unfortunately Foster's diatribe would – at least to those using his type of argument – justify the belief that all this hostility to the Sri Lankan government is precisely because it is not right-wing enough. Foster uses as evidence for his fears about a post-conflict settlement what he terms attacks on the Sri Lankan media, citing an arrest of an editor for suspected links with terrorists. The suspicions may be misplaced, but obviously an arrest is not an attack, the latter being totally unacceptable, the former something that cannot be challenged provided it is transparent and open. And then, harping on his old theme, he claims that what he described the 'government's apparently hostile attitude towards the UN' lends legitimacy to fears also about the prospective political settlement. The UN thus, without reference to the ideas or pronouncements of senior UN representatives, becomes the universal touchstone, checks on the UN being used as evidence to justify fears of genocide as well as fears that 'the final settlement will be so discriminatory and demanding of subservience from the Tamil minority that it will amount to a piece of ethnic suppression/cleansing in all but name'. So the genocide alleged by Tamil groups and privileged by Foster now turns into 'ethnic suppression/cleansing', with total disregard for the many Tamil politicians working with the government, heading the Provincial administration for the East, looking forward to elections in the North which the LTTE managed to prevent for so long, killing the last two Mayors elected by the citizens of Jaffna.

Foster ends with a grand finale in terms of what he calls 'a simple account of one aid worker's experience on the ground'. It purports to be about one particular food convoy, but then refers to two occasions on which 'government propaganda leaflets were secreted into vehicles'. Why no one else has heard of this until

Foster's correspondent wrote to him makes one wonder whether all this can be taken seriously, Foster's new friend – or perhaps the same old one – gives a graphic description of what they saw en route, which he says a colleague compared to Somalia when talking to the BBC. He says that this angered the government so the man – John Campbell – was banned from going to the Vanni, but that decision was taken by the UN, which found that Campbell had violated his contract and subsequently sent him away from Sri Lanka. Unfortunately both Foster and his correspondent do not realize that the UN has certain rules which it has to take seriously, because they were instituted precisely to avoid the type of subjectivity that Foster privileges, and which his blog exemplifies. But for Foster this is an example of 'control of the press and objective reporting', with no recognition that this was a consequence of the UN rightly abiding by its own rules. Foster's friend then complains about possible dangers to the convoy, claiming that it was safe because of the care it exercised, ignoring the fact that several convoys have gone in over the last few months with no harm coming to any of them. His little description of the journey concludes with a description of Sri Lankan soldiers 'splashing around almost naked in the river' and asks with glee 'Is it much surprise that the army take such heavy casualties?' Evidently, like some character out of E. M. Forster, instead of having an epiphany about such things, Foster's veteran thinks that death is a suitable punishment for nudity, and that wearing discreet bathing trunks might save Sri Lankan soldiers from Tiger bullets. Finally, at journey's end, there is another search which it is claimed is carried out 'by soldiers with a pompous attitude which would not have been tolerated by those being searched on Belfast Streets years ago'. Obviously Foster's friend has no idea what the people in Belfast suffered, though he should perhaps read up the Northern Ireland Ombudsman's report on the subject, and wonder why officers refused to answer questions about it. I suspect the citizens of Belfast would have been delighted if they had only suffered problems connected with 'Food containers were opened, toothpaste tubes, etc.' Then we come back again to the Somalia story, the hero of which refused to meet the commanding general because 'he was not to be humiliated.' Such a touching sense of dignity, no sense of abiding by his contract and not embarrassing the UN for which he works. But then, such bravado befits a former British serviceman, who cannot remember whom or what he is meant to be serving. A distinguished Indian diplomat, in commenting on the manner in which the Western World has taken over many UN positions, at least at the lower levels, noted also that the whole culture suffered from the fact that these youngsters came from Non-Governmental Organizations, and hoped to go back into them. We also know that many of these organizations are funded by governments who see them as a sort of special branch in their endless struggle against whatever enemy they have diagnosed at any particular time. These organizations now also received increasing amounts of UN funding, as I found out recently when I asked the Head of UNHCR why he was not doing as much as the NGOs which had prominently marked their names on the equipment they were dishing out – only to be told that all this equipment was UNHCR equipment, and the NGOs reaping such credit were simply the implementing partners of the UN. John Campbell came out of the British army, and doubtless, if he cannot go back into it, dreams of a life as an international NGO worker, with no need to bathe naked in rivers since such workers can use swimming pools in five star hotels – and frequently do, as the state of the art vehicles outside such hotels in Colombo testify. There is nothing a poor country can do about all this, we can only hope that at least some of the crumbs from the tables of these rich countries and rich men go to the intended beneficiaries – and that the UN, as its name signifies, recognizes that it is our UN, not simply another guest at the rich man's table. Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha Secretary General Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process