BBC distortions and lies

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The airwaves were spinning on Wednesday March 3rd with the claim that the ICRC had said that there was an impending humanitarian catastrophe in north-eastern Sri Lanka. It was highlighted on BBC World and, apart from having to answer various Sri Lankan media outfits who called me about this well before dawn, I even had to face an interview on World Radio Switzerland, with what seemed yet another gung-ho Britisher.
The problem was, there was no such assertion by the ICRC. Having perhaps a more rigorous academic background than all these youngsters, I asked my pre-dawn wake up call to send me the ICRC statement, and instead got a BBC report instead, by a certain David Loyn, the International Development Correspondent of BBC News, based on statements by Jacques de Maio, the ICRC Head of Operations for South Asia. I was able therefore to respond that it was difficult to distinguish what was ICRC and what was BBC, and certainly it seemed that some assertions could not have been by the ICRC since they contradicted what the ICRC had said previously. I was particularly anxious not to be critical of the ICRC, because we had had a meeting the previous day with the Vice-President of the ICRC, who had seemed appreciative of our point that the ICRC had to be very careful about what they said, since it could so easily be twisted. I cited early reports by the current ICRC Head in Sri Lanka, Paul Castella, about which I had written to him confidentially, to get back a very helpful reply which explained what had happened, but that they would reconsider the question. The more recent statements by the ICRC in Colombo have been restrained, and have not been twisted, and I had in fact conveyed my thanks to Mr. Castella about this. Earlier I had pointed out to him a particularly misleading statement by Mr. de Maio, and it was therefore surprising, after our meeting on the 2nd, to find Mr. de Maio reported as talking what seemed nonsense. However it seemed best to give him the benefit of the doubt and I did so in the morning, and then got in touch that afternoon with the Vice-President, who checked and told me that Mr. de Maio had been misquoted. She promised to put up the actual text of the interview he had given the BBC on the ICRC website, and to send it to me the following morning, which she duly did. The text of the interview is appended. I was therefore able to tell the World Radio Switzerland interviewer that he really should check his sources. He claimed initially to be citing the ICRC, but this turned out on questioning to be the BBC and other media sources, which again turned out to be the BBC and other media sources based on the BBC report. Thus do falsehoods spread, and unless one assumes that young David Loyn is singularly obtuse, these are deliberate falsehoods. I have long learnt not to suspect villainy when incompetence is a possible explanation, but unless BBC standards of intelligence have declined considerably since my youth, this I am afraid is clearly villainy. I have not included here the BBC report, but it is worth noting that it begins with the assertion that the ICRC warns of an impending humanitarian catastrophe. All these words are those of the BBC, as is the word tragic. Mr. de Maio certainly describes the situation as disastrous, but immediately says that the suffering and death could be avoided ‘by allowing civilians who want to leave to get out of the area’. This indeed was the thrust of his comments according to the Vice-President, as we had in fact discussed, because obviously the priority now was to ensure the safety of these civilians. But the BBC ignores de Maio’s words, which emphasize the fact that those who want to leave are not being allowed to do so, and instead of the seminal ‘by’ introduces abstract phrases preceded by ‘to allow’, which suggests the blame lies elsewhere. It goes further and declares categorically that ‘the government has allowed in far less (aid) than is needed’, which of course was not said by Maio at all. Maio talks of a ferry that regularly evacuates wounded civilians, but the BBC, with its Boys’ Own Magazine mentality, says ‘In one place, the ICRC has succeeded in landing a boat to take off the wounded’. Then there are direct quotes from Mr. de Maio about the complex moral choices being made by those deciding who should be saved, whereas Mr. de Maio, according to the ICRC, actually said something quite different, and referred to the priorities set by local medical professionals. The BBC however dramatizes by putting into Mr. de Maio’s mouth the claim that ‘When we reach the beach with the ferry there are exchanges of fire, there are thousands of people on this beach, they are stranded on basically sand and salty water’. Evidently in Mr. Loyn’s experience it is astonishing that a beach should have sand and salty water. This phrase is perhaps evidence that the man is actually a fool and not a villain, but it may be due to limited experience of just the pebbles of Brighton Beach. In short, we have here yet another example of BBC distortion: In this case, having made the point that such distortion was now endemic, as part of the last ditch effort of the LTTE to use its last weapon, these suffering civilians, to halt the progress of the Sri Lankan forces, we were able to contact the ICRC and ensure the publication of the actual text of the interview. But how many lies of the BBC have passed unquestioned thus far, to be circulated round and round the world by those who do not understand that integrity and objectivity are no longer important to that once wonderful British institution. The text issued by the ICRC of the interview with Mr. de Maio Sri Lanka: ICRC reiterates concern for civilians cut off by the fighting Jacques de Maio, the ICRC's head of operations for South Asia, speaks of the tragic humanitarian situation in northern Sri Lanka. Could you describe the humanitarian situation in conflict-torn northern Sri Lanka? Concerning the civilian population trapped by the continuing fighting in the Vanni region, it is definitely one of the most disastrous situations I have come across. Yet it would be possible to avoid further unnecessary suffering and death by allowing civilians who want to leave to get out of the area. It is urgent that more humanitarian assistance be brought into the Vanni now. With the support of the parties to the conflict, we have been using a ferry to regularly evacuate wounded civilians and others from the area near Putumattalan, in the north-east, where thousands of people are stranded in the coastal area. They are exposed to shelling and exchanges of gunfire in this area. People die. There is no functioning hospital or other medical facility in the area. The facilities that did exist have been shelled and are mostly destroyed. How do you decide who can be evacuated on the ferry? The decision as to who is evacuated on the ferry is taken in agreement with all the authorities concerned, based on priorities set out by local medical professionals. Tragically, we have to leave many people behind who also want to leave. This is very difficult to handle for our people on

the ground. So even though it is positive that in the last three weeks we managed to save up to 2,400 people, we cannot but think of the people left behind, particularly the wounded and sick. What is your fear when it comes to civilians in the Vanni? Civilians are literally trapped in the combat zone. In the ongoing military confrontation, civilians and other non-combatants are dying in the line of fire and cannot receive life-saving assistance. The obligation to distinguish fighters from civilians and plain common sense dictate that the civilian population should be urgently evacuated. Meanwhile, as a matter of absolute urgency, much-needed relief (medical supplies in particular) must be brought in. Did you manage to get any medical supplies in? What I can tell you is that we have so far not been able to bring enough appropriate medical supplies into the area. We would like to be able to do more to support government health officials on the spot who are treating the wounded. Apart from medicines, the people there also urgently need food. How many civilians are currently in the Vanni? Because of the confusion caused by the fighting and repeated population movements it is very difficult to come up with an accurate figure. The margin of error is quite large, but we believe that up to 150,000 people may still be trapped in the Vanni. Prof Rajiva Wijesinha Secretary General Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process