British parliamentarian suffering from an overdose of imagination

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Andrew Dismore, Labour Member of Parliament for an obscure suburb in Northwest London, sounds as though he has been sniffing something. In an article described rather hopefully as ‘comment’ on the Guardian website today, he does a very good job of repeating LTTE propaganda, while completely failing to note what are accepted by the United Nations and other international agencies as the essential facts of the Sri Lankan conflict.

The only point Dismore gets right is that the Sri Lankan government is currently in the middle of fighting, but this is a war against a banned terrorist organisation, not the Tamil people. While the LTTE did at one time represent the aspirations of sections of the Tamil community, that was long ago. Today, Tamils are desperate to get away to the safety of Government controlled areas, and the LTTE is shooting them in the back.

This can’t be dismissed as the crazed efforts of a group fighting for its survival either, although that would be bad enough. The LTTE has long trampled on the rights of the Tamil community, and they have responded by withdrawing support. Tamils have been killed in large numbers by the LTTE, particularly those who have attempted to take on leadership roles. Members of rival groups, who joined mainstream politics in preference to continuing their violent struggle against the state, have fared the worst, but they have certainly not been alone. The LTTE has killed prominent civil society activists, the Deputy Secretary General of the Peace Secretariat and the Foreign Minister, to name but a few of the Tamil people who have been cut down so far.

Of course the fact that the LTTE is a fascist organisation doesn’t justify anything other than what the Sri Lankan government is doing, which is attempting to put a stop to its atrocities. Terrorists can’t be allowed to control territory, not only as a matter of very obvious principle in a democratic country, but also because it enables them to manufacture suicide jackets, construct planes, submarines and so on, and brainwash the poor children they regularly abduct without fear of interruption.

In his altered state, Dismore tries to make people think that the Sri Lankan government is up to something rather less worthy, throwing around a lot of claims that basically originate from the LTTE. He talks of cluster bombs and white phosphorus, both trendy buzzwords after the exploits of the United States and Israel in their far less careful struggles against terrorism, despite there being absolutely no evidence of their use in Sri Lanka. Believing unsubstantiated claims put about by the LTTE at a time when it is on the brink of collapse is obviously not sensible, and his position as a representative of the British people demands greater concern for the truth.

Amnesty International fell into this trap earlier. It was responsible for the propagation of the notion that cluster bombs had been used by the Sri Lankan forces, quoting United Nations officials as saying that they had been dropped on a hospital. But the United Nations later said that its people had been mistaken in identifying the weapons used, with local representatives having described by telephone the noises they had heard outside, and expatriate staff in Colombo wrongly interpreting their description. Andrew Dismore may be forgiven for not knowing this to be a false claim, because Amnesty International didn’t bother to withdraw its statement. Indeed, this failure to issue corrections is a serious problem for the Sri Lankan government, because United Nations officials have also admitted that firing they initially claimed might have come from either side was almost certainly done by terrorists.

Most ridiculous is Dismore’s assertion that independent observers would call the Sri Lankan government campaign against the LTTE genocide. The LTTE has been spreading this claim around as liberally as possible, presumably in the hope that people, at least those who don't know that most Tamils live in Government controlled areas and that Colombo is a Tamil majority city, will believe that there could be no smoke without fire. Dismore ought to explain who the independent observers are, because even the strongest critics of the Sri Lankan government have explicitly stated that there is no genocide in Sri Lanka. Human Rights Watch made such a statement last week.

Obviously innocent people are dying. The Sri Lankan government considers even a single civilian death to be one too many, and it has given instructions to the Security Forces to do everything possible to avoid mistakes in targeting. Indeed, we have even been monitoring accusations of casualties made by websites connected to the LTTE such as TamilNet, and found that there have been very few instances. Since we made these discoveries public, of course, TamilNet has increased its accusations considerably, and the figure Andrew Dismore gives for civilian deaths since the beginning of the year coincides with its latest claims. That the Security Forces are being incredibly careful is however obvious, given the rather slow progress they have been making in recovering the last few square kilometres of territory.

The LTTE is responsible for the majority of civilian deaths. The United Nations has confirmed that the LTTE has been firing on people trying to escape to Government controlled areas, as well as despatching suicide bombers to explode themselves amongst those who succeed as they make their way to Government welfare centres. It has also said that at least some of the shelling that has killed civilians definitely originated with the LTTE, while establishing which side was guilty in other cases, according to the United Nations, has not been possible.

Dismore makes it clear that his mind really has fogged over when he suggests that the Sri Lankan government has left people without food. Given the efforts made to get supplies into LTTE controlled areas, first by road and now also by ship, which have occupied Government officials day and night for the last six months, this is appalling ignorance.

Dismore even claims that the Sri Lankan government has prevented the United Nations agencies from helping people, although most of the work done by Government officials has been coordinated with the World Food Programme, with the International Committee of the Red Cross negotiating safe passage from LTTE bosses.

If this British parliamentarian isn't suffering from an overdose of imagination, today's article can only be a ploy to win votes from the Tamil diaspora in Northwest London. Sri Lankans who left the country many years ago are sadly out of touch with the situation here, and they are constantly bombarded with LTTE propaganda. Andrew Dismore's obvious

desire to pander to their misconceptions is understandable in a politician, but he must draw the line at embracing a terrorist agenda.

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