# The Return of Gareth Evans, the Resurrection of Terror

Thursday, 12 March 2009
Last Updated Thursday, 12 March 2009

Once again the International Crisis Group has pronounced on Sri Lanka, bang on cue after the other usual suspects. Most negative of these was Human Rights Watch, which is a specialist, along with ICG, in purporting to be balanced. In fact they both persist in treating an elected government on a par with the terrorists they thus privilege.
Both of them specialise in being economical with the truth, most notably by being extravagant about numbers. They also seem unduly wary of anyone who can correct their mistakes. Human Rights Watch has failed to respond to my rebuttals of their claims and most recently, despite what seemed initial enthusiasm on the part of their Director, refused to meet me in Geneva. International Crisis Group, in the form of its presiding genius Gareth Evans, failed to answer in 2007 to my detailed refutation of his suggestion that Sri Lanka was ripe for his own version of the doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect.
When I met him late last year in Geneva, he affected surprise when I told him he had not responded. Neither he nor his sidekick in Colombo, Alan Keenan, has since responded to my reminders. This is perhaps understandable since Gareth actually said that he realised I was a difficult person to engage with. In short, when they come across someone who knows more about a situation than they do, they run away - though I hope that that is not the reason for Gareth finally deciding to call it a day and leave ICG and his perverse patronising version of the doctrine he was instrumental in developing.
Unfortunately his organisation has returned to the charge, with the usual farrago of inaccuracies. It begins by claiming that 'An estimated 150,000 civilians are trapped in an ever shrinking space, forcibly held back by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and exposed to indiscriminate attacks by the Sri Lankan military.' That figure as Gareth and his crew know is contested, so to shore it up they add later 'Independent estimates from sources on the ground and satellite imagery suggest at least 150,000 people are trapped by the LTTE and the Sri Lankan military, more than the level claimed by the Sri Lankan government. 'Who are these independent observers? Are they similar to the poor government official who claims today that the figure is 330,000? Is it the UN, which has in fact gradually been reducing its estimates, along with even the most hysterical media outlets which at one stage were claiming 400,000?
And where does ICG get its accounts of satellite imagery? Surely with his excellent sources Gareth must be aware that at the last meeting of the UN group that saw itself as engaged in protection the report from satellite imagery was between 70,000 (which is the GOSL figure) and 100,000. Why then do Gareth and his ilk simply pronounce, without even the most rudimentary attempt to check their sources?

Then, along with his friends in HRW, he talks about 'indiscriminate attacks' by the Sri Lankan forces. Surely he must know that indiscriminate attacks would have brought total victory long ago to the forces. It is precisely because the army is holding back on use of heavy weapons, in deference to the human shields the LTTE is using, that the LTTE is continuing to resist, that the number of civilian casualties is far fewer than when the LTTE used their heavy weaponry from amidst civilians, and that in fact the Sri Lankan forces are suffering heavier casualties than previously.
The ICG claims that 'Thousands have already been killed and many more wounded', which is correct in terms of the worst case scenario, that on Tamilnet, which has about 2,500 killed from June last year to now, and about 3,000 injured. The number went up dramatically in January (there were fewer than 100 allegations of civilian deaths previously), in part because the LTTE started firing indiscriminately (as UNDP has recorded) and in part because the LTTE started forcibly conscripting even more civilians, including children (as UNICEF has testified).
But ICG makes clear its main aim early on when it demands pressure to stop what it terms the Sri Lankan government's 'policy of annihilation'. It wants the government to 'hold off on the final assault to allow relief to reach the civilian populations and to make it possible for those civilians who wish to leave to do so'. We have been here before, with HRW also wanting somehow to let the LTTE off the hook. Though they clothe it in the guise of concern for civilians, it is crystal clear to everyone that it is the LTTE that is holding onto these civilians, as it did for nine long months when the international community stood back and allowed them to be tormented.
ICG pretend that they want the LTTE to release the civilians, but twin it with a surrender that involves the 'personal security of LTTE leaders and fighters guaranteed by the international community'. Why such kindness now? Why does ICG, which for years did not think of unequivocally asking terrorists to surrender, or even to return to negotiations, suddenly want the international community to guarantee the personal security of this unsavoury crew? The Sri Lankan government is pledged to give the LTTE leadership a fair trial, and has indicated that an amnesty will be available for those dragooned into fighting. Why does ICG think the Tigers deserve greater privileges?
ICG claims that '150,000 people... have little access to fresh water, food, or medicine', and suggest that little was provided between January and March. This is nonsense, given the food that has been taken in regularly right through February, a fact ICG gets over by talking about the latest delivery being the first 'major' aid. With regard to the hysteria about illness, again we have been here before, with the prophets of doom predicting epidemics every month for the latter part of last year, not bothering to explain why they were wrong when, month after month, they had to report that the health situation was under control. The explanation lies in the tremendous efforts of our national Ministry of Health, which has accordingly been nominated for the Felix Houphouet-Boigny Peace Prize, with support from the UN.

ICG claims that 'UN agencies have documented more than 2,300 civilian deaths and at least 6,500 injuries since late January,' which again is tosh. The UN made an estimate, which was then withdrawn (although it turned out to have been leaked, obviously to ICG too), and in any case granted that in the only cases where there was certainty about the source of firing, it was the LTTE. Then there is the sweeping statement that 'More than 100 victims are arriving each day in the

make-shift medical centres still functioning in Wanni, many of whom die before evacuation,' which is again nonsense, belied by the next sentence 'The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been able to evacuate some 2,000 injured and sick persons over the past few weeks'. Since the evacuation process began just about four weeks back, and since the ICRC also began to bring out the sick, i.e. when they had brought out all the war wounded, ICG really needs to study its multiplication tables.

Any death should however be regretted, as should any injury, but this should be accompanied by clear condemnation of those responsible. ICG said nothing when the civilians were driven from pillar to post over the last nine months. It has ignored the clear evidence of the Tamil Bishop of Jaffna and the UN that the LTTE has been firing into the safe zone, and instead it repeats the LTTE canard that 'the government has continued shelling of civilian areas - including its own unilaterally declared "no fire zone" -- without any significant pause over the past two months,' which is another bit of bombast since it is less than two months since the government declared a safe zone.

It is in fact outrageous that ICG should claim that government acts 'regardless of the cost to civilians'. More officers and men have died in the last couple of weeks precisely because the forces are not using heavy weapons. It seems that Gareth Evans and his heartless crew not only want to see more sacrifices on the part of the Sri Lankan army, but insist on lying about it. Contrariwise Sir John Holmes had the decency, when told about the tactics now being employed, to remark that this meant more casualties for the forces. Instead of even noting this possibility, the ICG declares that 'Unable to fire their weapons in a manner that respects the distinction between combatant and non-combatant, most government attacks at this point are by their very nature indiscriminate. 'This is simply rank ignorance masquerading as sanctimoniousness.

And then ICG pronounces. With no idea of the reach of terrorism it declares, 'The Sri Lankan military has already achieved its military objectives and essentially won the war.' It then comes out with suggestions that would have made sense some months ago, but which it scrupulously avoided, perhaps because it was then engaged in plotting with individuals with sympathies for the LTTE. Gareth's sidekick Alan Keenan was one of the key players in the preparation of a petition to the UN Secretary General which these secretive international NGOs then got Sri Lankan NGOs to present.

Now, again, the performance of ICG seems much of a muchness with that of those anxious that the Tigers should get away to fight another day. For the sake of humanity, of the children forced into Tiger ranks, of the poor Tamils driven to suicide for what ICG with superb understatement claims is a 'Tiger leadership, which has become as much a cult as a rational guerrilla force' it is time to put a stop to such ultimately destructive self-righteousness.

Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha  Secretary GeneralSecretariat for Coordinating the Peace ProcessCourtesy: SCOPP