
Wrong again, Miss Hogg

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For a long time, organisations like Human Rights Watch looked no worse than sadly misguided. Their intellectual capacities obviously weren't up to the analysis of basic facts, and their unshakeable belief in the fundamental goodness of humankind led them to assume that terrorists couldn't be as dangerous as they seemed, but their intentions weren't really in doubt. Lately, however, it has become clear that they must have some other agenda.

The most recent article in a series attacking the Sri Lankan government, by the Human Rights Watch South Asia Researcher Charu Lata Hogg, was published in a Japanese newspaper earlier this week. And it was particularly crude in its methods. Lying now seems to be perfectly acceptable to these modern day crusaders. In her opening paragraph, Hogg describes in rather compelling detail what she calls the scenes of death and destruction in the Vanni. Dead bodies of civilians lie strewn along dusty roads, she says. Hospitals, playgrounds and houses stand ravaged by rockets fired from multi-barrel launchers. If Hogg has managed to identify the weaponry used and even noted the dirt underfoot, she must have a very good idea of what is going on, readers might be forgiven for assuming. Except that she hasn't been within fifty kilometres of the conflict zone. Hogg would probably argue that this is because the Government hasn't allowed her to go, peculiarly concerned for her safety as she dashes across territory the LTTE has scattered with landmines to risk being hit by bullets Prabhakaran intends for escaping civilians. But this is no excuse for making things up. Readers may also like to think that Hogg is just filling the gaps in her story. They may want to give her the benefit of the doubt, given that she operates under the rather useful banner of human rights. Perhaps she got those reports from somebody else and just made a silly mistake in presenting them as her own experiences. Hogg might have checked to ensure that she wasn't just repeating propaganda from the LTTE, although it isn't clear how. It is a lot to swallow. Independent journalists would have explained that the statements were no more than hearsay because they hadn't seen for themselves, but Hogg apparently doesn't feel the need to meet even the lowest quality standards when pontificating to the rest of the world. Hogg then claims that Human Rights Watch research indicates that there have been up to two thousand civilian deaths since the beginning of January. This is rather cunning, because it would be true even if none had occurred. But more disturbing is that the figure coincides with that being put about by TamilNet. And Hogg doesn't indicate how else she came by the information. Readers may now be somewhat unwilling to just assume that her sources are not connected to the LTTE. As the Peace Secretariat has pointed out before, TamilNet started inflating reports of civilian deaths after we highlighted the very small number of allegations being made, with considerably less than a hundred in the six months to the end of December. This lackadaisical attitude with regard to figures is nothing compared to the discussion of responsibility. Hogg distributes blame almost evenly, stating that both the Army and the LTTE committed the killings. Then she subtly gives the impression that the majority were the responsibility of the Army, saying that many of the civilian deaths have occurred in areas designated by the Government as safe zones. What she doesn't admit to is that the United Nations has said that the LTTE was probably behind at least some of these attacks on safe zones, while responsibility for others can't be ascertained. It has also confirmed that the LTTE has been shooting at civilians trying to escape. The difference between accidents and deliberate targeting doesn't appear to be clear to Hogg either. The LTTE is engaged in the latter, which is what makes it a terrorist organisation. She hides this moral issue by pretending that the Government has sanctioned violations of the rules of war by telling the Army to treat everybody in the conflict zone as LTTE supporters, which is just nonsense. The Government and the Army Commander have made numerous statements on the need for a military strategy without collateral damage. Indeed, if not for this determination to avoid civilian deaths, it would have been possible to finish off the LTTE months ago. The Army could have reduced such a tiny area to rubble within days, as others have done in their struggles against terrorism elsewhere, instead of which it has been losing an increasing number of soldiers and spending ever more on equipment and weaponry. While accidents do of course happen, probably more often than they should because of the LTTE policy of using civilians as a human shield, Hogg has absolutely no justification for her claims of an all out war. Hogg doesn't show any greater concern for the truth when dealing with places she has actually been able to visit. She claims to have interviewed dozens of IDPs in Vavuniya, but what she has to say about their situation has little to do with reality. The basic premise is that people are as badly off in Government care as they were in the clutches of the LTTE, which is a very sick joke in the circumstances. Hogg claims that while civilians who remain in the conflict zone come under fire as they run for cover, those who manage to flee lie wounded and dying without adequate medical care in hospital wards or militarised welfare centres. She says that there are few hopes for these IDPs because Government has inflicted its own atrocities on their community. It would appear that Hogg wants people to head back into the conflict zone, presumably to stand guard over Prabhakaran and his swimming pools. Readers will have noted another rather egregious falsification in these descriptions of life in Vavuniya. Obviously some IDPs have been injured, and they are now being treated in Government hospitals. While standards may not be quite up to Harley Street, and Hogg might do well to remember that at least services are free, they are perfectly acceptable. In fact, the United Nations has praised our healthcare facilities on numerous occasions, and outcomes have long been better than in other countries with our income. More relevantly still, the vast majority of IDPs are not lying anywhere. Hogg has not been into the welfare centres, another problem she would undoubtedly blame on the Government, although her stay in the country was incognito. But there can be no excuse for her overactive imagination this time. Independent journalists have been inside, and she could have even watched their video footage online from the comfort of her office in London. This demonstrates that the IDPs are healthy, being fed and clothed and provided with shelter, that the children are at school, and that young people and adults are getting training to put them in a better position to support themselves when they return home. The Government doesn't allow all and sundry to run around the welfare centres, having learnt a good lesson from the jamboree that followed the tsunami, plus needing to

take additional security measures in the face of serious threats from the LTTE, but they aren't cut off from scrutiny. The question of militarisation is getting a bit old too. Hogg pretends that the fact that the Army runs the welfare centres makes them threatening, and has a good tug at heart strings with her claim that loved ones are seen through barbed wire fences but families kept apart. In fact, all efforts are being made to get those families who happened to be separated on their way down from the Vanni back together again. And Hogg would realise that barbed wire fences are quite common in England too, if only she didn't spend so much time skulking around this country. The Army is doing a good job in what are very trying circumstances, with thousands of people to cater for, because it is an efficient organisation and has a vested interest in ensuring that the IDPs are well looked after, so that the gains they have made at terrible cost in terms of the lives and health of their colleagues are not undone. Human Rights Watch must have its reasons for this whole deception, and for the relentlessness of its efforts to denigrate the Sri Lankan government. And here comes the final lie. While it churns out articles and statements at a tremendous rate, it claims that the Sri Lankan conflict is getting no attention in the international arena. If that were true, the Peace Secretariat could get on with its real work instead of having to reply to so many false accusations made by people like Charu Lata Hogg. Communications Division Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process