
SCOPP Secretary General responds at UN dialogue on Displaced Persons

Monday, 16 March 2009

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Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha, Secretary General of the Peace Secretariat and Secretary to the Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights, spoke in the debate on the report of the Special Representative on the Rights of Displaced Persons in Geneva today. His comments in response to interventions by states and non-governmental organisations are carried below.

Sri Lanka is grateful to those countries and non-Governmental Organisations that raised questions about the situation of the internally displaced in Sri Lanka, since it enables us to provide further information on the situation. I am grateful myself, Mr President, since though I was complaining earlier about having to stay on, in a cold and comfortless Geneva, the independent Sri Lankan press reported yesterday that the Peace Secretariat is amongst the targets of the 25 or so LTTE suicide cadres that have infiltrated the capital. It is therefore a relief to linger here to deal with the verbal pyrotechnics of Amnesty International et al, rather than face the real thing.

Mr President, Amnesty International at least had the courtesy to have a discussion with us, and I am sorry that the countries of the European Union which raised queries turned down our invitation to discuss issues of concern. Sweden was an honourable exception, and I was happy to inform its representatives that the figure they are working with is now generally recognised as exaggerated. If I might quote from the minutes of the UN Protection Group, held on February 25th –

Update on Humanitarian Situation in the Vanni, IDP exit numbers and possible scenarios

In a daily meeting of Security Operations Information Centre comprising UNDSS, UNOCHA, SOLIDAR and UNOPS, analysis of satellite imagery and other information is being used to try to identify numbers and locations of IDPs in the Vanni and in particular in the no-fire/safe area. The number of civilians in safe area is thought to be between 70,000 to 100,000 individuals.

You may well wonder, Mr President, why the UN did not share this figure with even the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, who claimed over two weeks later that 'According to UN estimates, a total of 150,000 to 180,000 civilians remain trapped in an ever shrinking area', but we have grown so used to incompetence and a lack of coordination amongst our undoubted superiors that we no longer suspect forked tongues, but have learnt simply to grin and bear it. Forked tongues are however apparent in the information conveyed by an NGO very keen on what it terms access, which had informed a Swiss parliamentarian that the Sri Lankan government was opposed to a plan to evacuate these suffering people. This, we have pointed out several times, is what we want, whereas the LTTE and its fronts have made clear their opposition to this. That particular NGO however is active in work amongst the displaced who did manage to escape, having swept up much UN and other funding, in the new game of three administrators for most tranches of assistance, with concomitant multiple overheads, so that our poor citizens do not benefit as much as the generous taxpayers in rich countries think they do.

This confirms the point we made in response to other interventions under this Agenda item, Mr President, concerning the need for transparency amongst non-Governmental organisations. One of those which pronounced here last week had never presented audited accounts, and had a treasurer who died five years ago. The source then of the funds for its regular excursions to Geneva should either be suspicious or the object of suspicion.

Mr President, NGOs who have committed to practical work are in the camps amongst the displaced, along with UN agencies. The allegations of sexual violence, of a lack of process to link families, of the presence of other armed Tamil groups, are nonsense, and would certainly have been brought to our attention by UN agencies had they even been conceivable. The sub-committee on psychosocial welfare is working with religious groups, and is now considering proposals, including one from the ICRC, for a large scale project in this area. I should note that I had in fact discussed work in this field with WHO as long ago as last September, because we actually anticipated then the problems that had to be faced.

With regard to the old IDPs, consultations on amendments to the Law on Prescription will lead soon to action on Resettlement, whilst the authority is due to meet today. Progress however has been slower than we had hoped during the Special Representative's last visit to Colombo, but when we met last week he expressed his understanding of this given the other emergency situations we have to face. We are delighted however to continue to work with him, since his whole approach is so refreshing, in comparison with those who seek merely to criticise but refuse to engage and discuss. Their reasons for this may be political or melodramatic, but we would suggest that genuine humanitarian concern would be preferable. courtesy:SCOPP