Sri Lanka: Bring on the White People

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by Ru Freeman "Democracy is a messy thing and all of these voices must be heard," said Amy Goodman, speaking as a journalist and for Democracy NOW, on the Bill Moyers show on Friday. She and Glenn Greenwald from Salon.com were being interviewed as the first recipients of the Park Center for Independent Media Izzy Award, named for I. F. Stone, the iconoclastic investigative journalist who self-published his alternative news in the I.F. Stone's Weekly in the 1960s. Goodman herself was participating in the seventy city "Standing Up To The Madness" tour for Democracy NOW where they were attempting to give unheard voices their due place on the airwaves. Journalists, according to Goodman and Greenwald, both of whom I admire and quote widely, are supposed to give the people the truth, not the party line. Which got me thinking, as a journalist, about truth, how we report it, the trustworthiness of our sources, and the way in which we choose to cover one part of the world versus another.

There is a movement within the U. S. Senate, ably assisted by national syndicated media, right now, to prevail upon the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL), to allow foreign journalists and foreign aid workers into the war-torn 21 square kilometers by the LTTE or Tamil Tigers, the militant separatist group which has won the street credentials to be deemed a terrorist organization by, among others, the USA, Canada and the entire European Union. 21 sq. km. which include the 20 sq. km. no-fire zone which is also being occupied by the LTTE and used to attack the government forces and, worse, Tamil civilians. There is no corresponding call to support the Tamil politicians working with the GOSL. At present, any journalist wishing to go into the areas of battle has to be cleared by the military, a policy which applies to Sri Lankan journalists of all ethnicities as well as foreign journalists. Particularly the latter, since the government is well aware of the cache that one foreign hostage could carry. Sri Lankan journalists are up for that challenge. They don't feel their manhood or womanhood is somehow compromised by adhering to those rules during a time of war. They are unlike the foreign aid-workers and media stars and congressional staffers who balk at the sight of white Israel and say not a word about brown Palestine, but feel it’s their prerogative to stomp all over a small democratic country full of brown people, sovereignty be damned. Goodman decried that, during the War on Iraq, the process of "embedded reporters," compromised the reporting of the truth, while also stating that if embedding was the only way in which reporters could be in the thick of things, where were the "imbeds" in Iraqi hospitals, prison camps and so forth. Of course, reporters were chosen to be embedded, but there was no restriction, beyond a state department warning - and obvious obstacles such as bombs and such - on journalists wishing to travel beyond the Green Zone. In other words, if some zealous reporter wished to wend his merry way into Basra on foot, nobody was stopping him. And likewise, if a similar journalist wanted to parachute herself into the jungles where the LTTE now reside, they could certainly make a go for it and good luck. But the point Goodman makes is a solid one, that "embedding" can and does bias the reporter toward the people with whom she cohabits. Witness the endless reports of personal sacrifice and heroic acts by American soldiers filed from the ground in those heady, early days, and the continued silence on the war dead among the Iraqi civilians. But what she failed to mention is this: why were there not then, with regard to Iraq, not reports from American reporters embedded in hospitals, but reports from sons-and-daughters of the soil Iraqi journalists? And why is it that to this day, Sri Lankan journalists of all ethnicities, aren't allowed to cover the stories about their own country? Why is it that when they do, they are accused of being mouthpieces for their government? Sri Lanka is a fairly youthful place, with the median age of approximately 30 years. It is a healthy nation, with an average life expectancy of 75, and universal health care. It boasts a literacy rate of 90.7%, higher than any other South Asian nation, and free education all the way through college. And this is true for men and women. It was described by the former American Ambassador to the country, Jeffrey Lunstead, during the Senate Foreign Relations sub-committee hearings on Sri Lanka, thus: "Sri Lanka is the Oldest and strongest democracy in South Asia, with very good socio-economic indicators, and high literacy, which shows that this country, which has had this terrible ethnic struggle for so long...could be an example for the region and the world, that terrorism is not the answer to a political issue." But neither the American-financed NGOs nor its media wants to tell us about what people like Lunstead, who actually lived in Sri Lanka for many years, bringing to his office the benefit of twenty-six years of experience as a diplomat at the time, might have to say. We hear, instead, from Anna Neistat, of Human Rights Watch, who denounced the entire country on the strength of a single, unidentified, witness, and a drive-by visit, and who - after all her hootin' and hollerin' was done - had to admit to Senator Casey that, in fact, humanitarian aid was reaching civilians, and all aid organizations were not being banned from the camps even though she had spent half an hour trying to prove otherwise. It turns out that, as far as Neistat and too many American newspaper editors are concerned, and in fact, as far as numerous non-governmental do-gooders are concerned, it doesn't count unless white people are there to deliver loaves of bread and baskets of fish. Nothing counts unless there is a quickly-unearthed translator on hand to tell them what the situation on the ground might be. It doesn't count if white people aren't writing the news. This even though there are journalists in Sri Lanka - some even educated at multiple American Ivies - who have been summoned here by the American public, no less, to help monitor their own rot-ridden presidential elections under the previous administration! Somehow their integrity is only valid on American soil, not on their own land. Here's another bit of news about Sri Lanka. This small island, about the size of Maine, once peered across the ocean and saw a large American ship draw close over a recently calmed ocean. By the time the Americans military landed, large-hearted and ready to help the struggling masses of Sri Lanka, they found that the situation had been stabilized, the dead were buried or being mourned, the injured being tended to throughout the country, even in rebel-territory (by none other than soldiers working together with former enemies), the Buddhists and Hindus sheltering sometimes in churches, the Catholics often in temples and kovils. Apparently the hearts of ordinary, vastly poorer, ecumenical Sri Lankans, and their government, were larger than suspected. Sri Lankans had faced a tsunami, the sort of event nobody knew was coming till it hit them, and figured out how to deal with it all by themselves in the immediate aftermath. Oddly enough, long-term recovery and reconstruction

was executed most expeditiously and cost-effectively by a people-to-people initiative that brought together similarly ordinary people from the small state of Maine and a local NGO, the Green Movement of Sri Lanka, which managed to work then and continues to work now throughout the North and East, landmines, soldiers or terrorists notwithstanding. Yes, the large aid organizations came, but they were stymied, as they always are, by an acute lack of understanding of the people they wanted to help, and a refusal to trust the local grassroots organizations that have their ear to the ground. Not unlike the Neistatites of today, no matter their beautiful logos, glossy brochures and huge staff of fundraisers. Meanwhile, in the land of the free, and the home of the rich, there came a hurricane, long anticipated and superbly plotted, named Katrina. And what, exactly, did the American government do? If the American media has forgotten, perhaps they would like to view the aptly named Spike Lee documentary, When The Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Parts. Such colossal neglect, the picture of the dead lying un-honored in its streets, its poor denied transportation, such everlasting international shame, was not the lot of that tiny island on the other side of the globe, called Sri Lanka. And yet the American media, and its so-called humanitarian organizations, have the nerve to pretend that Sri Lankans themselves are doing nothing for its refugees today? What I saw in New Orleans, August 2005, were reporters tiptoeing in to be video taped in front of the destruction. I didn't see them get down on their hands and knees to dig through the rubble to find survivors. Back in Sri Lanka, there wasn't a heck of a lot of fine TV news after the tsunami. People in the industry were too busy behaving like human beings and helping the bereaved. It was the American mainstream media which failed, year after year to report the truth behind the invasion on Iraq, who followed, hook line and sinker, the tall tales spouting from their court-appointed, lobbyist-anointed president, and whose only act of contrition came from a small town reporter from Fredericksburg, Virginia, Rich Mercier, who apologized on behalf of the entire industry. And it is this same media that now presumes to talk about yet another country, one most of them have never visited, flaying an entire people they don't know or give a damn about. Mercier said, "Maybe we'll do a better job next war." Well, there's no better job being done on the new wars, my friend, in fact, what your colleagues in the media are busy doing is bestowing credibility on pretty young pop stars and who never, not once, believe that brown journalists can speak the truth about their own country. Your industry is no better than people like Neistat who think that rice and dhal and karavala and sambol being delivered by Sri Lankan Sinhalese and Tamils and Muslims to their fellow-citizens in the camps in the North, or giving up their beds in hospitals in the South to accommodate the sick and injured people coming down from the North, does not constitute humanitarian relief. Humanitarian relief apparently only comes in tin cans full of over-boiled vegetables (that Sri Lankans don't eat), MREs and hand-me-down American clothes originally made by Sri Lankan women underpaid by American corporations in the Free-Trade Zones of Sri Lanka. The American media is waiting, in sort of the same way it did on the shores of Mogadishu, for a reality TV show story with white people, suitably chiseled and clad, in the lead roles. The Senate sub committee on these matters, (which incidentally covers the countries of the Middle East, all of the countries of North Africa from Egypt to Morocco, and the countries of South and Central Asia because, after all, ten American senators can surely absorb the intricacies of the internal politics of all those brown nations without ever having to actually so much as visit any of them), is, nonetheless chaired by a man I do have faith in: Senator Bob Casey of my home state of Pennsylvania. We will continue to hear discouraging words articulated by people like Neistat who make a game of the realities of other nations, and whose views are distributed far and wide by newspapermen with no integrity and their eye on their next cocktail. But I take heart in the fact that Senator Casey was one of President Barack Obama's right hand men on the campaign trail. The two stood together, repeatedly, pillars of calm and restraint, unswayed by praise or blame, their eyes fixed always on a larger purpose. I am hopeful that in this new American administration there will not be a rush to judgment about any country, least of all a country about which senior administrators know so little about, and its lay-legislators in the media, even less. Perhaps this will be the dawning of the age of trickle-down intelligence. Perhaps Democracy NOW will lead the charge to recognize the rights and truths of journalists from other nations as well. After all, they, too, are worthy of being relieved of "the madness." Ru Freeman is a writer and activist. She lives in Pennsylvania. Courtesy:commondreams.org