
SRI LANKA'S TOP PEACE OFFICIAL REPLIES GUARDIAN EDITORIAL

Sunday, 12 April 2009

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The Editor The Guardian Sir, Your editorial of 11th April was right in spirit but wrong as to several facts. The way to end the suffering of the civilians trapped in the no-fire zone is for the LTTE, which trapped them, to let them go. They refuse to do this. Obviously it is because they can use them there, or rather use their suffering. On the few occasions on which the UN was able to establish who was responsible for firing into the no-fire zone, they said it was the LTTE, a fact borne out also by the Bishop of Jaffna, as in his press release of January 26th, when the government first declared a no-fire zone. You may doubt the denial of the Sri Lankan forces that they were responsible for recent deaths, but you must grant that the record of these forces, in the liberation of the East as well as action in the North until December (using worst possible case figures, the allegations on TamilNet), prove a concern for civilian life unparalleled in similar excursions, for instance the Irish one you use as comparison. Your answer, and that of media outlets, is that journalists should be allowed in to check. Surprisingly, we are concerned about the safety of journalists, given that even last month a British MP blamed the Sri Lankan forces for injuries suffered by a British correspondent way back at the beginning of this decade, when she had slipped in to sup with the Tigers before there was any ceasefire. Collateral damage cannot always be avoided, but as you know British MPs will make much of damage to a British journalist, ignoring the thousands of Sri Lankans who have fallen victims to the terrorism they refuse to condemn. A simpler answer is to put all your energies into insisting that the LTTE let the civilians go. However, you too have fallen into the trap of suggesting that the facilities offered to these civilians are dreadful. Why then have over 60,000 made their way to us, despite the bullets and bombs and propaganda of the LTTE and those who have fallen for this last? Why did we host a visit last week by the UN Secretary General's Special Representative on the Rights of IDPs, except that we wanted his more adult response, in the context of vicious denigration by unaccountable critics? Why did he grant that security considerations were important, and therefore detention of those seeking refuge was acceptable (this is not internment of people taken from their homes, as the Germans did to the Jews or the British to the Boers), but that there should be limits? Why would he have suggested a scheme of release for those hopefully beyond suspicion, the elderly, the disabled, children and single mothers, whilst leaving the matter open as to others, unless he recognized our legitimate security concerns? We believe we should work towards the goals he suggests, and had indeed begun allowing old people to rejoin relatives or go to special Elders' Homes that religious communities, Hindu and Catholic, have kindly started. But we know that there is a continuing danger that at least a few of those who have sought refuge are waiting to kill, as one person did in the queue of women and children waiting to cross over to us. The danger of such plants will only pass when the leadership that instructs them is no longer in a position to issue its brutal orders. That is why we must deal now with the LTTE leaders who have sought refuge in the safe zone we earmarked for civilians, who are using those civilians now for military purposes as it did for years while the so-called international community who functioned amongst them said nothing and did nothing to help. Some hard core LTTE militiamen finally fought us outside the safe zone last week, but it was only to allow their cowardly leaders to slip away and hide amongst civilians. The international community, which kept silent for so long, owes it to the poor suffering Tamil civilians, whom it allowed to be driven from pillar to post over the last nine months, to at least now say categorically to the LTTE that these people must be freed. No amount of mealy-mouthed 'balanced' criticism of both sides will help them, what is needed now is moral courage to address the LTTE forcefully. Let me conclude that any remarks about the need for a political solution, about the responsibility of the government to its Tamil citizens, about the need for democratic pluralism, will be accepted with respect, so long as there is a clear distinction between such laudable ideals and what can seem to those of us who have suffered so much a sneaking affection for terrorism and terrorists. Yours sincerely Rajiva Wijesinha Secretary General Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process