
British blunders

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by Kath Noble Trips back home to England always prove useful in understanding how the Sri Lankan conflict is viewed from afar. Away from the relentless debate about what is happening in the Vanni, what the Government should do, how much longer the war is going to continue, what to expect afterwards, whether the LTTE can survive without territory, how to reach a political settlement with the Tamil community, and what Robert O. Blake and others are saying about it, a rather clearer picture emerges.

My latest visit took place at a very interesting time. Tamil expatriates were massed in their hundreds in Parliament Square, a couple of them on hunger strike, and Parliamentarians were reaching for their megaphones whenever the opportunity arose. The situation in that tiny bit of land to the north of Mullaitivu was in the newspapers or on the radio most days. People were not talking about it on the streets, which is hardly surprising given that Sri Lanka is a small and distant island, but the chattering classes were engaged. It was not the forgotten conflict that NGOs like Amnesty International have referred to in each of the numerous press releases they have issued in recent months. The attention is well deserved, of course. Events in Sri Lanka are worth knowing about, and we should all be concerned for the people caught up in this awful war. Hoping for an end to their suffering is not only proper but also quite laudable. On the basis of thoroughly unscientific research amongst friends and acquaintances, I would venture to suggest that there is one key fact that British people do not know. This is that the Vanni civilians, who are so extensively reported to be getting injured and killed in increasing numbers, are not just trapped between two opposing armies. When you do not know that the civilians are being held against their will to protect the LTTE, everything changes. People think that the Sri Lankan forces are advancing, firing ahead of their positions, backing civilians into a hole from which they cannot get out, and then dropping a few more bombs in on them. This would be despicable. It is also what would make a humanitarian pause sensible, indeed essential. If the problem were that the civilians were trapped by the firing of Sri Lankan forces, or perhaps the exchange between them and the LTTE, then the obvious thing to do would be to stop for a while and let the civilians march through to safety. The only thing people understand of what the Government says in response to this suggestion is no, we must keep firing. It is foolish, but this is what happens when conclusions are drawn without basis. Some sixty thousand people have reached Government lines in the past few months, and soldiers have brought them all to the Vavuniya camps without incident. Army positions must be visible from the safe zone now, so there is no arduous journey to be made. There is no difficulty on the Government side. Logically, it is obvious. The presence of civilians greatly inconveniences the Army, who must be desperate for them to get out of the way. The problem comes with the LTTE, which forces civilians to take up arms, help build defences or simply provide cover for it to launch mortars at the Army. Prabhakaran could not survive without them. It is simple, really. When cadres are free to police the edges of the safe zone, they fire at or bomb people who try to leave. Another sixty thousand people or so are in danger as a result. If the Government were to call a halt to its offensive, the only thing that would happen is that the LTTE would have a lot less to do other than preventing civilians from escaping. It is possible that fewer people would suffer during a humanitarian pause, but even more would die or get injured later, thanks to Prabhakaran and his ruthless determination not to compromise. It would be very nice to imagine that another outcome could emerge. The idea that there is no alternative but to fight on, doing whatever possible to avoid what others refer to as collateral damage, but accepting that innocents will be affected terribly, is quite horrible. Maybe the Government is not doing whatever possible, but it is certainly doing a lot. One of the reasons the use of the word genocide by some activists and pressure groups is so offensive is that, if wiping out the entire community were the objective, the few square kilometres in question would have been reduced to dust long ago. Indeed, this could have been done just to save time and money. British people do not know that the suffering of the Vanni civilians is down to the LTTE, because they are not told about the human shield. The intermediaries we all rely on to provide us with the necessary information, from journalists to Parliamentarians, somehow manage to hide the truth, whether deliberately or otherwise. At best, it comes in the equivalent of the small print, tucked away in the middle of a lot of confusing details in an article entitled something implying the Government is to blame, like 'Shameful siege', variations on which appeared in the editorials of both The Guardian and The Times last week. Even the decision to restrict Army operations during the New Year holidays was presented as a wonderful opportunity for the Vanni civilians to get out, as if the LTTE were no obstacle. People assume, on the basis that the LTTE claims to be fighting on behalf of the Vanni civilians, that any problems they are encountering must be the fault of the other side. Parliamentarians are the least innocent of the purveyors of befuddlement. Having listened to or read about what a number of them had to say about the Sri Lankan conflict almost every day for the last couple of weeks, and found their pronouncements to be quite extraordinary, I went back to the most recent debate on the subject in Westminster. When Parliamentarians get together, they can speak for much longer than when there are journalists around to encourage them towards a point. It seemed only fair therefore to look and see if they made any more sense on those occasions, when they were completely free to explain their positions. Two complementary strategies assist them in the process of avoiding giving the British people the necessary information to understand what is going on. First, the Parliamentarians repeat any stories passed on to them, so long as these present the Government in a bad light. They are mobbed by Tamil expatriates in their constituency surgeries every week, all with gruesome descriptions of life in the Vanni, but they do not seem worried that these might be entirely untrue. The fact that there are tremendous incentives for the LTTE to plant false information in this way does not bother them at all. Liberal Democrat MP Simon Hughes read out an anonymous letter to the Bishop of Mannar claiming that the Government used child soldiers and the destruction of the Tamil race was imminent. More ridiculous assertions would be hard to make up, but they were repeated in Westminster as if they might well be accurate. Labour MP Siobhan McDonagh explained how they had all seen videos taken by what she described as very brave people in the Vanni, somehow convinced that it was not only the LTTE who had access to

recording equipment and communication facilities in that little piece of beach above Mullaitivu. Civilians do not have food, according to her, but there is nothing wrong with their IT supplies. Secondly, the Parliamentarians insist that any information coming from the Government is necessarily wrong, so that denials can be ignored altogether. Useful for this purpose is to harp on about there being no journalists or NGOs in the Vanni to check, a line that is repeated after pretty much every sentence. I do not believe what the Government tells me either, but I still look at its statements. This is how I know that the cluster bomb story is nonsense, for example. Labour MP Joan Ryan condemned the Government for using these weapons in the Vanni, as if it were an indisputable fact, but anybody who has paid attention knows that this claim first appeared on TamilNet, was mistakenly picked up by the United Nations, and found its way around the world thanks to Amnesty International, who used the UN statement as its only evidence, even after the United Nations had withdrawn it. Thus the entertaining piece that appeared in these pages some weeks ago about the Amnesty International representative who tried to explain that although the Government did not have any cluster bombs, perhaps a group of unruly soldiers had acquired them from Prabhakaran and somehow engineered the things to fit into their rocket launchers, hoping all the while that they did not perish of old age before the ordinance could be dispatched. It was all twaddle, in other words, but the Parliamentarians do not care to be informed of such developments. Meanwhile, Joan Ryan goes around telling the British people that the Government has used white phosphorous, when there is not the slightest bit of evidence for it. That the accusation was made on TamilNet around the time Israel was criticised for using the same chemical in Gaza ought to make her suspicious, but she appears determined not to think. I used to believe that these Parliamentarians were badly informed, that they, like the British people I spoke to during my visit, just did not know better. Sri Lanka is a complicated place, and probably they were too busy to study it in detail. They simply guessed at what their opinions should be, and the only thing we could blame them for was interfering in something on which they were not qualified to comment. This was naïve. The latest debate made it clear, with several examples of what can only be calculated deception. When Siobhan McDonagh complained that the majority of newspapers simply repeated Government propaganda, for example, which is imaginative enough in itself, she cited Marie Cohen as one of the few independents brave enough to speak out. The Sunday Times reporter was attacked by Government forces while reporting in Sri Lanka, the MP claimed, suffering head and chest injuries and losing an eye. What better proof of the lack of media freedom, except that approximately two minutes of investigation uncovers the fact that this happened during wartime under the previous but one administration, as Marie Cohen was sneaking back across the frontlines in the dark after a few days chatting to Prabhakaran. It was a sham. We are not talking about all Parliamentarians, of course. Only about a dozen are involved, but they are very active, and there is nobody to challenge them. Others just ignore the subject, and the Ministers are hardly better. A couple of hundred thousand votes appear to be sufficient reason for them all to turn a blind eye. Journalists, meanwhile, seem to be far more interested in looking into problems in Sri Lanka than holding their own representatives to account. Although this is undoubtedly more fun, they should know that their primary responsibility lies at home in England. I concluded my trip wondering about the impact of this misleading picture of the Sri Lankan conflict that is being presented in Britain and, I have the feeling, in a good deal of the English speaking West. It would seem that no amount of pressure from abroad will change the Government's approach in the Vanni, so the pressure that the false impression creates on Gordon Brown and others to take action is not immediately relevant. However, Sri Lanka must eventually convince the rest of the world that it is moving along the right track. Having the support of Asian countries and the rest of the Global South is most crucial, but it would not hurt to do better in other regions too. Kath Noble is a freelance journalist based in Colombo. She can be contacted by email at kathnoble99@gmail.com. Courtesy: Island.lk