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## Killing them softly

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By Kath Noble  
One of the letters I received in response to my piece in The Island the other day about Western perceptions of the conflict in Sri Lanka was rather brief in its criticism. In fact, I am only assuming that it was supposed to be criticism, because the message did not specify. It was simply a list of websites. There was the Tamil Youth Organisation, a number of Tamil expatriate groups from Switzerland, and the website that hosts those videos the British Parliamentarians have been watching of late.

It struck me in part because of the British Parliamentarians. One of the things they keep banging on about, and a point that was brought up several times in the most recent debate in Westminster, is the fabulous propaganda of the Sri Lankan government. Now, I did not see their faces while they said this, so it is possible that they were grinning, tongue firmly wedged in cheek, but I suppose it would be inappropriate to assume so much. The British Parliamentarians may be jokers, but we are usually laughing at them rather than with them, more often crying. Anyway, listeners would have got the impression that the information machine at the disposal of Mahinda Rajapaksa was considerably more advanced than that set up by the infamous Joseph Goebbels. Poor old Prabhakaran, they implied, struggling to get his message across in the face of such an onslaught. There was talk of millions of dollars being spent, emails landing in inboxes several times a day, and so on. Of course, everybody in Sri Lanka knows that the efforts of a handful of diplomats and other public servants notwithstanding, the Government has astonishingly little capacity in the field. There are numerous ministers who appear to be working hard to undermine the administration every time they open their mouths, whereas the LTTE is completely disciplined in its efforts. It has a range of diaspora organisations, not to mention paid lobbyists like Bruce Fein, running around promoting its view of the situation. The websites that the reader in question sent me appeared to be largely in Tamil or German, in neither of which languages I am competent. But this is irrelevant. There are plenty of others in English, and probably in French, Spanish and more. TamilNet is one of the best known, but the array of LTTE supporting websites is impressive. I read them occasionally, like an awful lot of Sri Lankans, to find out what the worst case scenario is, how bad the actions of the Government could possibly be. I also took the opportunity of my recent visit home to drop in at Tamil House, headquarters of the British Tamils Forum. Keeping an open mind has to be a good thing, and I was interested to see what the most active diaspora organisation would tell a journalist who came in asking for information. Although the British Tamils Forum states that it has no connection with the LTTE, which the ban makes necessary, it was set up around the time that the British Tamils Association was compromised. AC Shanthan, founder of the latter group, was convicted of terrorism offences on Friday after a lengthy trial. What I encountered at Tamil House was enough to convince me that there was no need to give the British Tamils Forum the benefit of the doubt either. It was as I was stepping over the placards with slogans like ‘Sri Lanka, stop your genocide against Tamils’ and ‘Lift the ban on the LTTE’ lying next to the front door that I started to feel a bit dubious. There is no genocide, and those who claim otherwise must be treated with the suspicion they deserve. Even if there were a genocide taking place, helping to arm a terrorist group would hardly be the most sensible option for a humanitarian organisation to be pushing. Certainly not when the terrorist group has a record of killing the people it claims are the victims of the genocide. Given that the LTTE has been doing its best to hold Tamils as hostages, shooting them in the back or exploding bombs in their midst if they attempt to escape to the safety of Government controlled areas, it seemed positively merciless to be calling for its efforts to be given a boost. The person I spoke to asked not to be quoted, because he was not authorised to give interviews. I sat and listened to him for about twenty minutes, until my stomach could no longer bear it, and I left with a handful of their publications. Both the documents and their deliverer were very smooth indeed, only too convincing in their glossiness. Most disturbing of the British Tamils Forum propaganda efforts is its insistence that civilians should not be moved out of the combat zone in Mullaitivu. Rather incredibly, they claim both that the people do not want to leave, and that to move them by force would be ethnic cleansing. Ridiculous as these allegations sound to most of us, given that a lot of the people are from Kilinochchi, Vavuniya or Mannar and were moved by the LTTE to Mullaitivu in the first place, and given that many civilians who have braved LTTE reprisals and made it out have told the world that they were held against their will, it has convinced others. Fortunately, the Security Forces appear to have gone a fair way towards neutralising this problem altogether, having breached the most important defences and helped several tens of thousand people out since I left Britain. The idea that the British Tamils Forum is not celebrating this rescue is quite chilling. The other rather worrying claim being made is that diaspora organisations represent the genuine will of Sri Lankan Tamils. The British Tamils Forum does not appear to have any time for leaders such as Vinayagamoorthis Muralitharan or Sivanesanathurai Chandrakanthan, or indeed Douglas Devananda. Perhaps like the LTTE they see everybody who is opposed to them as traitors. I have heard the Eastern Provincial Council being referred to as a Vichy government more than once in Britain, where even Tamil expatriates seem to love their World War II references. Any political developments favourable to Tamils make it harder to convince people of the accuracy of the British Tamils Forum propaganda, which does not mention such things. Sri Lankan Tamils are presented as being so terrorised that they cannot be trusted to speak up with their honest opinions. Given the reports coming out about the recent protests that claim that some people were forced to march in support of the LTTE rather than just against the war, it is a bit rich. There is also a history of intimidation connected with fundraising to consider. The LTTE is known for imposing itself abroad as well as at home. I went to see the demonstration in Parliament Square too, although not with the intention of speaking to Subramanyam Parameswaran, the young man on hunger strike. He is not so many years junior to me, but he seemed positively childlike in his weakness. I could not bring myself to talk to somebody in the process of killing himself in the pursuit of what I considered to be misguided objectives. It was some days after the main event, in which one hundred thousand or more Tamils marched through from the Thames to Hyde Park. Nevertheless, there were still crowds of a few hundred in the vicinity. As when I watched the footage on television, it was the children that drew my

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attention. A number were sheltering under 'Tamil Eelam' umbrellas, one wearing an 'I Love Tamil Eelam' T-shirt, with 'Sri Lanka, stop your genocide against Tamils' on the back. Many of them were joining in the refrain being led by a group of students, almost shouting themselves hoarse. 'Our nation', a girl screamed repeatedly, to which the reply came back sharp and to the point: 'Tamil Eelam'. 'Our leader', she yelled: 'Prabhakaran'. A teenager handed me a leaflet about Subramanyam Parameswaran, saying he was a friend who had to be supported. Prompted in Tamil by an older girl who was accompanying her, she explained that there was a genocide happening in Sri Lanka. Subramanyam Parameswaran may not be as innocent as he looked, but there can be no doubt about the abuse of the children. I asked myself what the future would bring for them, and what Sri Lanka could expect from them in years to come. Having been fed with so much vile propaganda at such a young age, it may not be easy to involve them in the politics and development work needed in the aftermath of the current fighting. At least the young people who were forcibly recruited in Sri Lanka will have the opportunity to go through a rehabilitation programme, which some are doing already. This returns us to the British Tamils Forum, of course. It may not be fair to single them out in this way, but they and others like them do bear considerable responsibility for their actions. They know the truth, yet distort it for the sake of Prabhakaran, apparently unconcerned at the impact, both immediate and eventual. Civilians may die, the war could drag on for another few years or even decades. The thing is that the British Tamils Forum does not have to live with any of this. They have another home now, but this is not the case for most of the people on whose behalf they claim to act. I suppose my intention here is just to say to the person who so eagerly informed me about those websites: yes, I know. I do not like what they say. Courtesy: Island.lk Kath Noble is a freelance journalist based in Colombo. She may be contacted by email at [kathnoble99@gmail.com](mailto:kathnoble99@gmail.com).