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## Mr. Miliband Prevaricates

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Though the British have a reputation for perfidy, there is also about them a sense of fair play, which makes them difficult to dislike. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the BBC where, though the Sinhala Service tends to criticize the government at any opportunity, the English programmes are better balanced, i.e. they are harsh about and to everyone. This was apparent in the interview conducted with Foreign Secretary David Miliband, when he visited one of the camps in Vavuniya. After some general questions, the interviewer, Martha Kearney, asked Mr. M. whether pressure could be brought on the Tamil community in exile. The response ignored the question, and instead talked about "peaceful demonstrations", as though to give a licence to the demonstrations in London that were clearly on behalf of a terrorist organization. Dodging questions does not work with the BBC. Ms Kearney promptly suggested that another way for the situation to be remedied was for the Tigers to surrender, and she asked if Mr. M were asking for that. The response was a classic exercise in obfuscation, returning to the demand "that the Tigers stop sheltering civilians, keep holding them hostage would be a better way of putting it", after which he went back to the political issues. Ms Kearney was not to be sidestepped. "Should the Tamil tigers surrender though?" she asked, loud and clear, only to be treated to another little foxtrot, about wanting them to renounce violence, after which there was a lecture about how Sri Lanka needed the international community and the international community was, as Queen Victoria might have put it, not amused. Thus Mr. Miliband deftly dissociated himself from the call of the Co-Chairs for the Tigers to surrender. It is scarcely surprising then that so many Sri Lankans see the current British interventions as designed specifically to save the Tigers. Obviously Mr. Miliband did not want to admit that the European Union spoke for all 27 member states when it joined the Norwegians and the Japanese and the Americans in calling on the Tigers to surrender.

\*\*\* Why have the British, clandestinely perhaps but now clearly, after Ms Kearney's blunt question, broken ranks on this issue? Though there may be other more subtle reasons, to do with their passionate desire for international influence, the obvious answer is the strength of the expatriate Tamil vote. Many Labour MPs in London have benefited from the strength of Tiger organization and, now that they have been threatened with a change of allegiance, they are naturally nervous. Certainly when it comes to throwing meat to Tigers they are no match for the Liberal Democrat Simon Hughes, who even took his clientele to meet the Conservative Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, and tried to persuade him to call for a Ceasefire. Fortunately Mr. J. was too wily to fall for that one but, given the latest news, about potential defections from Labour to the Liberal Democrats, you can see why Mr. M. might be nervous about defections to the LibDems in the forthcoming elections for the European Parliament. Still, the idea of appeasing the Tigers to prevent this distant possibility might have seemed farfetched, were it not for a report in the Times about why the hunger strike in London stopped. The first striker stopped, it will be remembered, after an intervention by Simon Hughes which led to him being taken off to New York by Des Browne to meet the UN Secretary General. Whether that meeting took place, and whether it had any effect, is not known, but clearly it would have taken even greater concessions to make the second striker stop. This time what actually transpired is shrouded in mystery. All the striker would say was that he had some news about which he could not say anything. They had planted some seeds but would have to wait "for the answer and the ceasefire". And "there were talks with politicians but he could not say who". In short, the striker felt he had had an impact. Assuming the politicians he spoke to were not totally cynical or dishonest, he could assume that he would achieve something, perhaps even a ceasefire. From the Sri Lankan point of view however the assumption must be that, to get the striker to stop, British politicians had been even more indulgent than before to the Tigers. In short, the war against terror, peace for the Sri Lankan people, matter nothing in comparison with a few votes. \*\*\* And so the relentless campaign against Sri Lanka continues. A UN report appears by accident on a website, and is highlighted in the London Times, which also tries to play the China card to reinforce Western hostility to Sri Lanka. The BBC English Service, it should be noted, mentions that it is difficult to verify whether the craters others fall into gleefully, as categorical evidence against Sri Lanka, are old or new. To make up for that, however, the World Service had a story on the evening of the 2nd of May about a hospital being shot at, with bullets whizzing around and hitting people. There seems to have been no mention of the heavy weaponry that was brought into play the next morning, again in relation to the hospital. Clearly someone had realized that bullets would not press the right buttons, and so had introduced heavy shelling and multiple deaths. However, they omitted to break the bottles in the pictures that were shown, which suggested that there was at least some exaggeration. Perhaps the earlier World Service story was true but, in the context of such expert media manipulation, there is no need to assume that there has to be fire for the sending up of smoke. But can one blame the media? They need excitement, and in the present situation, with the Tigers limited to a tiny space, all their energy has to be expended on propaganda. They are in a wonderful position to supply the pyrotechnics on which the media needs. More reprehensible surely are those politicians who are playing with lives in giving the Tigers hope that they will survive to fight another day. Mr. Miliband saw the thousands who had fled from the Tigers. To prevaricate without demanding that the Tigers surrender may not be a war crime, but it will certainly lead to much unnecessary suffering. Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha Secretary General Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process