
The Global Game

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By Kath Noble In Sri Lanka, it can be difficult to remember who the international community is. The phrase has become synonymous with the rich countries of the West, largely the United States and Britain, with Norway, Germany, France and a few other hangers-on being included when convenient. And this is no accident. Global public opinion has been stolen. A handful of governments are calling themselves the international community to lend weight to their dodgy pronouncements, and it's about time we stopped them

We had David Miliband and Bernard Kouchner visiting the other day, as if they were the official representatives of the six and a half billion people across the waters, despatched to explain the considered opinion of humanity on Sri Lanka's conflict. Hillary Clinton actually said as much, when she told journalists that the entire world was disappointed with the Sri Lankan government for causing Tamil people untold suffering. Before we know it, Hillary Clinton will be claiming that this intervention was vital in bringing peace to Sri Lanka. Although David Trimble, Northern Ireland's original First Minister and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, dismissed her suggestion that she played an important role in settling their problems as 'a wee bit silly', she probably continues to think otherwise. Who can say, the IRA might still be bombing London if she hadn't accompanied Bill to a few dinners. Perhaps they were very good restaurants. We may not recall her attacking the British government for having caused the people of Northern Ireland such terrible pain over the years, but she doesn't appear to be concerned by the double standard. Westerners are basically good chaps, aren't they? Or she will be misspeaking again, forgetting that the statement was made in Washington, thinking that she actually came to Sri Lanka with David Miliband and Bernard Kouchner. Come the next elections, Hillary Clinton will be telling people that they had to run for their lives at Katunayake Airport as mortars rained down on them from all sides, which the usual suspects will interpret as meaning that both the Sri Lankan Army and the LTTE were responsible. If those pesky journalists hadn't uncovered the footage of her in Bosnia, strolling across the tarmac from Air Force One to hug a small child and grasp a large number of welcoming hands, when she claimed to have been dodging sniper fire, we might have believed her. Hillary Clinton shouldn't be a credible representative of the United States after those performances, and the idea that she speaks for the entire world is completely ridiculous. When she added that the people fighting in Sri Lanka had to be brought into the political process, she lost her remaining authority. Maybe a cup of tea with Bill is exactly what Prabhakaran needs to be convinced of the merits of democracy, but we shouldn't count on it. How about David Miliband and Bernard Kouchner? They may only be ministers in countries that account for roughly one percent of the global population, making their glorious entry into Colombo seem a little overdone, but at least they don't have a record of lying. What they do have in common with Hillary Clinton is an enthusiasm for interfering in other countries. Bernard Kouchner was the driving force behind the Responsibility to Protect, and the French government hasn't given up on it despite all the flaws - it was one of the few specifics, other than anti-Iranian bluster, that the French ambassador mentioned in his contribution to the World Conference Against Racism the other week. David Miliband, meanwhile, is doing his best impression of Tony Blair, trying to help Sri Lankans in much the same way as the British government was of assistance to Afghans and Iraqis, bringing them democracy and other wonderful ideals that appear much less important when human sacrifices are required, presumably in the hope that it will land him the top job when the Labour party decides to get rid of Gordon Brown. Again, behind it all is this idea that Westerners are basically good chaps. Seeing as we have mentioned the World Conference Against Racism, this might be a good topic for discussion at the next one, for it seems rather discriminatory. The international community, which means all the two hundred states who are represented in the United Nations, does not think that there is a case for interfering in the Sri Lankan conflict. It has said as much. Instead of having the courtesy to argue the point, the West breaks ranks. Its leaders pontificate, as if they were the genuine moral authority. A few states call for their proposals be implemented. And these aren't really just suggestions. They are demands. The United Nations is dismissed on the basis that Russia and China hold veto powers, and they haven't ever been good chaps, only strong men. They are consistently in the wrong, whatever the situation. The West has produced a lot of James Bond films to prove it. This would be alright if the self-image were deserved, for Sri Lanka could do with all the help it can get, but we know perfectly well that the picture is warped. Western governments have done a lot worse to far greater numbers of innocent people than the Sri Lankan administration could ever manage, even if that were its intention, and not in the distant past either. Mahinda Rajapaksa has faults aplenty, but it is only Western leaders who are new to their jobs who can even try to suggest that they would do better. Collateral damage in other wars has been measurable in the hundreds of thousands. Going back further into history, millions of innocent people have been killed deliberately, just to finish things off. Of course, foreigners have been the ones to suffer. They aren't good chaps, like Westerners, are they? The World Conference Against Racism would seem to have another subject to put on its agenda. We, it must be admitted, do rather encourage all this self-aggrandisement. If David Miliband and Bernard Kouchner had looked at the media coverage of their visit, they would have gotten the impression that nothing more important had happened for weeks. Newspapers were full of reports on what they said, how annoying or groundbreaking it was, depending on the political orientation of the commentator, and what they might do when they went home. Television cameras seemed to have followed them everywhere, as if they were participating in the next series of Big Brother. Some people even went to the trouble of protesting outside their embassies, while environmentalists continue to line the majority of Colombo streets with posters denouncing them. Cutting garbage seems to be useful as an election gimmick, but not really worthwhile when it comes to real life. It would have been very reassuring for the ministers, to discover that Sri Lankans were hanging on their every word, because they must have been slightly worried that people would be too busy looking for Prabhakaran, or indeed taking care of the thousands of IDPs in Vavuniya and elsewhere. At least they might have expected Sri Lanka to be distracted by talking about these issues, even if doing something were proving tricky. This is not to suggest that what David Miliband and Bernard Kouchner say ought not to be reported or commented

upon, just that we should keep it in perspective. Thirty seconds as the last item on news bulletins would do it, or a few column inches on page five, with suitable clarifications by relevant authorities and others where necessary. Recognition that they, and even Hillary Clinton, are not the only members of the international community would help too. This newspaper published an interview with the Russian Ambassador last week, but there have been very few other attempts to engage with the vast majority who have another opinion. Even if attention were granted on the basis of funds provided to Sri Lanka, we would still have things in a mess, given that Japan tops that list. Countries in the Middle East, and even Iran, ought to be there as well. The United States, Britain and France have promised money for relief work, but India is more important on that and indeed all levels. China is key too, of course. It might be argued that these countries are saying very little, India excluded, while the latter country gets plenty of space and time anyway, but that doesn't excuse the imbalance. More worrying than any of this massaging of Western egos is the Government, which doesn't seem interested in anybody else. Hosting all these visitors from the West is a good thing. Whatever impressions they had of Sri Lanka before they set off from home, it would be very difficult for them to return with a worse view. Their imaginations have created quite appalling scenarios, as we know. The Government has to grasp every opportunity to put across the facts of the situation as it can, because there is such a quantity of misinformation around. And although it is undoubtedly time consuming, organising hundreds of meetings and trips to the same old places, with the usual faces, this would seem to be a useful thing for one of the largest public services in the world to be doing. While there are many problems and a fair number of untoward things going on here, Western leaders aren't so foolish as not to see when genuine efforts are being made, within unavoidable constraints. However, just reacting to the actions of states that make noise simply can't be the best way to handle the situation. A bit of proactive thinking is needed too, and this must take note of the fact that the international community is not synonymous with the West. Other states, while currently keeping quiet, might be persuaded to back Western moves against Sri Lanka in future, out of genuine concern or otherwise, while they might actively support this country if a greater effort were made to explain the situation, and to support them in turn when such backing is required. They know when they aren't considered sufficiently important to bother with, and this kind of approach isn't likely to bring positive results. There was a time when Sri Lanka understood the benefits of wide ranging engagement with the international community. Given the behaviour of Western representatives of late, we might have expected a more concerted effort to be made to reach out beyond them. That it isn't happening is rather disappointing. Kath Noble is a freelance journalist based in Colombo. She may be contacted by email at kathnoble99@gmail.com. Courtesy: Island.lk