The suffering of civilians cornered by Human Rights Watch

Friday, 08 May 2009
Last Updated Friday, 08 May 2009

The Anglo American Corporation Human Rights Watch is now engaged in a campaign, along with its patrons, to denigrate Sri Lanka in the eyes of the Human Rights Council in Geneva. This follows its campaign throughout 2009 to dissuade civilians from leaving LTTE controlled territory to refuge with the Sri Lankan government.

In both cases, the HRW agenda fits in with that of the LTTE. This may not be deliberate, but it is certainly convenient for the LTTE. Now that the LTTE is reduced to using the civilians it has entrapped, not just as a shield, but as a weapon of mass destruction, HRW has begun to issue lengthy descriptions of their suffering. It ignores completely its own contribution to this suffering, through its protracted campaign to suggest throughout 2008 that the civilians were as well off with the LTTE as they would be with government. In July last year, when it became clear that the Tigers were forcing civilians to accompany them as they retreated into smaller and smaller areas, HRW began the game of claiming that the facilities the Sri Lankan government provided for refugees were internment camps. Rousing emotions associated with what the British did to the Boers and the Nazis to the Jews, forcibly taking people from their homes, HRW thus sought to persuade the world that the civilians the LTTE were forcing to go along with them would suffer just as much if they succeeded in escaping. This year the campaign continued, with vicious falsehoods about conditions in the welfare centres, and claims of shortages of food and medicine in February, when we were looking after fewer than 40,000. No one else made such claims, so HRW obviously had an ulterior motive in continuing to insinuate that people would suffer if they succeeded in getting away from the LTTE. Despite this dissuasion, nearly 30,000 more fled to us in March, and over a 100,000 in April. Finally now the penny seems to have dropped, that conditions of life with the LTTE are much worse than those in government welfare centres. But even so, HRW manages to write a whole article on the horrors of the No-Fire Zone without a single mention of the fact that the LTTE will not let people leave. This is evil evasion. HRW provides a description of refugees who left the No-Fire Zone on the 20th of April, and spent nine days at sea, but omits to mention that that was the day on which the Sri Lankan forces managed to breach one of the walls the LTTE had built, enabling 40,000 people to flee to safety with the government, followed by another 70,000 on the next two days. There is no mention of this rescue operation in the article, no demand that the LTTE set free the hostages it has taken. Instead HRW’s senior Asia researcher, yet another in the band of mercenaries paid to denigrate Sri Lanka, claims that ‘The Sri Lankan government is doing everything it can to keep these stories of suffering from reaching the world’. Nonsense. The Sri Lankan government knows there is suffering, suffering because the Tigers ration the food we are sending in as those who have fled to us make clear (but HRW will doubtless claim that we are starving them in internment camps); suffering because the Tigers have piled up heavy weaponry in the zone and are using it in particular against civilians trying to get away (but why should anyone want to get away, according to HRW, since conditions are equally bad everywhere); suffering because of the landmines the Tigers have strewn in profusion, and which caused the bulk of the injuries of those who succeeded in fleeing to us (and also a number of the deaths TamilNet declared occurred on that day). According to Human Rights Watch, in its latest bombshell, timed to explode as its mentors strive to rouse feeling against Sri Lanka at the Human Rights Council, just as the LTTE flag waving demonstrators are doing in Western capitals, all this is the fault of the Sri Lankan government. Even the one mention of LTTE firing is accompanied by the assertion that this puts civilians at risk from retaliatory fire. The story of the boat people is truly horrifying. The owner of the boat lost six members of his family, a mason lost five, and seems to be left with just his 8 month old son. But it never occurs to Human Rights Watch that the root cause of this suffering is the wickedness of the LTTE, in holding these people for so long, in firing at those who tried to flee by land, in building walls and laying mines to stop them getting away. But there is more to it than this. There is also the contribution of Human Rights Watch, which strove so hard for so long, in its bitterness against Sri Lanka, to deny the magnitude of the LTTE horrors. They may find it easier to continue to blame Sri Lanka. But if they are at all bothered about their immortal souls, they should stop to consider how their connivance with an LTTE agenda has helped that terrorist organization. Human Rights Watch has thus contributed to the immeasurable suffering of the Tamil people trapped by the LTTE, seeking to escape, dying so tragically even when in sight of freedom. The LTTE may be appallingly evil. Human Rights Watch exemplifies the banality of evil, as Hannah Arendt described it, the triviality and self-centredness that has contributed to so much destruction in this world. Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha Secretary General

Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process