
The doublespeak of the "world community"

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Prof Rajiva WIJESINHA Many years ago George Orwell wrote a book called 1984, in which he prefigured Prabhakaran, a dominant figure who presided over a well of human misery. As we hear more from the Sri Lankans who have now escaped his clutches, as we see pictures of the luxury he and his family enjoyed, as we shudder at the injuries caused to the fleeing by bullets and landmines, we are reminded of the destruction and human misery imposed by those who seek and achieve absolute power.

But there was another aspect of 1984 that also came to prominence last week, as we noted the extraordinary perversion of language used by those who want to hold the Sri Lankan state responsible for the misery Prabhakaran has caused. For Orwell also invented something called "Doublespeak", namely the use of language to mean the opposite of what was said. Thus last week saw a spate of visits by foreigners, all of them complaining that the Sri Lankan government has limited access to the welfare centres in which our fellow Sri Lankans who escaped the Tigers are now housed. They claim that journalists are not allowed to go there, when the place has been bursting with journalists who have been reporting quite freely on what they saw and even on what they did not see. The most remarkable use of doublespeak has however been that of the UN, which has mastered the art of expanding its bureaucracy whilst delivering much less than what it promised, much less than could be expected from the funds lavished on it by donors who seem to suspect the intentions, the capacity and the financial integrity of the Sri Lankan government and Sri Lankan Civil Society. The exception to this is non-governmental organizations devoted to what is termed advocacy, which is interpreted as being not advocacy on behalf of the Sri Lankan people, but advocacy against the government the Sri Lankan people elected - which was why the European Union, having sworn blind that it did not give funds to humanitarian national NGOs because its regulations forbade this, had to confess that it did give money to other types of national NGOs such as the Centre for Policy Alternatives, but that was under a different scheme. Still, donors are entitled to do what they want with their money, and we cannot complain if they have their chosen beneficiaries. There may be a moral flaw, in that the taxpayers in donor countries are told that they are paying for poor people in the third world, but the poor intended recipients of largesse get very little of it by the time the funds have gone through the bureaucracies of the donor country (necessary), the United Nations (perhaps desirable, if it truly represented the Nations of the World rather than a small segment of it), an International NGO (undesirable unless that NGO, like the old capable ones, actually collects money at home rather than seeking it in the target country), and then often local NGOs (acceptable, since at least salaries are expended in country instead of back in the West). But morality has nothing to do with it, the world of international aid being as much about the naked exercise of power as other aspects of diplomacy. We must be glad about what we get, and even more glad that there are at least some countries who give ungrudgingly and without making a song and dance about it. But Asian traditions are not Western ones, and like Oliver Twist we must learn to be humble. Obligation It does however become a bit much when we also have to put up with doublespeak from at least some elements in the UN, who forget that they are supposed to be our partners. Last week saw a particularly ugly display of patronage, when the self-obsessed young women who think they are protecting Sri Lankans misled their superiors in Colombo about how they had handled what they presented as serious issues. Ignoring their obligation to work together with Sri Lankan partners to correct anything that might be wrong, they trumpeted it publicly, achieving the mass media publicity that was obviously their intention. But more serious perhaps was the squalid treatment meted out to the IDPs. From the start we had asked that decent housing be provided, and we were assured that this would be done. I had a pleasant description of the type of shelter that would be built, with tarpaulins and frames which allowed one to stand, instead of the ghastly tents we had found so painful previously. But then, lo and behold, it was precisely those tents that were flown in, at great expense, the efforts of the Ministry of Nation Building to suggest local purchase being ignored when a whole host finally managed to escape the Tigers. That so many tents should have been put up so quickly was however something for which we had to be grateful. What was surprising was that, after we had been specially enjoined to ensure that there was land to pitch them, and after our forces worked day and night to ensure this, we were told that a designated site might not be to the satisfaction of the UN. Then, not only after the sudden rush, but even before, contrary to what had been promised, the toilets did not keep up with the shelters that were put up, and what we had was ghastly. There were insufficient open spaces, insufficient learning centres for children. Sadly, there had been a controversy about putting up comfortable sheds using thatch, some foreigners claiming either that this was inadequate or else that it cost more than was permissible (these two opposite excuses are heard all the time, often simultaneously). Again, with regard to toilets, decent toilets at a reasonable cost had been put up earlier, but these met with a storm of protest, with UNHCR claiming that they were being blamed by their donors on the grounds that water and sanitation was not their business. No wonder several Sri Lankans have come to believe that at least a few individuals in the UN system want to create problems, to have overflowing toilets, so that they can claim that the state is incapable of looking after its own. And sure enough the expected barrage about this did come, in the form of first letters and then a demarche from a number of Special Rapporteurs, none of whom had indicated any desire to engage with the Sri Lankan delegation to the last session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva. These included Rapporteurs on Food and Health and Water, and also for good measure the Rapporteur on Extra-Judicial Killings, who is evidently under the impression that our attempt to rescue the hostages in the Safe Zone must be stopped at once. That all of them should pounce together, just when the principal donors were trying to arrange a special session to rouse emotions about Sri Lanka, cannot be mere coincidence. Grabbed by Tigers Those Rapporteurs surprisingly received no complaints from UN staff on the ground when the food we sent in to the citizens in the Vanni was grabbed by the Tigers for their own purposes, which included using rice bags for bunkers. Though their concern now is touching, and will we hope lead to better toilets at least, it seems of a piece with a system that has managed to ensure two leaks, one mistake and a couple of direct hits in the form of media

performances by junior staff, all damaging to Sri Lanka, in the course of the last few months. This contrasts magnificently with the fact that their records of continuing forced recruitment by the Tigers, which were confined to internal documents, were kept scrupulously safe from any publicity, all the time they remained in the Vanni. What is quite remarkable is that, having acted either carelessly or callously in a way that damaged the government, such people think it is our fault that they do not have the confidence of the Sri Lankan people at large. It is our fault that individuals they see as connected to government criticize them roundly and their name is mud in most national newspapers and amongst the average Sri Lankan. Conversely it is also our fault that we are losing the media battle elsewhere, and that the newspapers they read, the media outlets they watch and listen to (and call up when there are particularly juicy bits to publicize) are so critical of us. Sometimes I wonder whether they think we are all complete idiots. But then, perhaps we are. Politeness is mistaken for obsequiousness, and perhaps we would have done better to be firm. We have allowed falsehoods about Sri Lanka to be propagated in official documents, without any protest. We have allowed an agency that purports to coordinate humanitarian assistance to do so without giving us any information as to who gave what aid for what purpose over the last three years. We have accepted apologies in private and not insisted that they be given in writing. And we have not made it clear that, whilst we can also see the many amongst them who are here to do good on behalf of our people, and whilst we will do whatever we can to help such people to help us, we will resist hypocrisy and doublespeak and assistance that traduces the dignity of our people. Courtesy: Sundayobserver.lk