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## The British baying for blood

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The last week has seen a spate of articles alleging atrocities in the welfare camps in which most of those rescued from the LTTE are now housed. The most recent of these is by someone called Gethin Chamberlain, who has claimed that 'Detainees in one of the camps told this reporter that a number of women Tamil Tigers have been murdered after surrendering to the authorities. The bodies of 11 young women were allegedly found with their throats cut outside the Menic Farm camp near the town of Vavuniya, according to people being held behind the razor wire perimeter.' This implies that Mr Chamberlain did have access to the camps, though he later claims that the allegations could not be confirmed because 'access to the camps is restricted.' The story then is embellished with a quotation from an 'official who has visited the camps recently... "A couple of weeks ago, 11 bodies were discovered. All these women had short hair. This is a tell-tale sign of women newly recruited to the LTTE. According to unconfirmed reports, these women had their throats slashed," the official said. Mr Chamberlain then quite unashamedly writes, 'Speaking through a third party with access to the camps, a number of those detained said they had heard about the discovery of the bodies.' Such relentless affirmation of the allegation is particularly bizarre, because on the day the story broke I had, as Secretary to the Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights, chaired a meeting of all the agencies involved in protection issues. UNHCR and UNICEF have received the bulk of the funding for protection under the Common Humanitarian Action Plan, but they have subcontracted to a number of Non-Governmental Organisations, National and International, and the room was absolutely full. I did not actually ask whether any of them had heard of eleven women with their throats slashed, since I did not know of this particular story then, but I asked whether any of them had any serious issues to report. This was in the context of the story put out by Charu Latha Hogg that youngsters were being abducted from the camps. Not one had heard of anything of the sort. I asked too about the allegations of rape, which had been aired over Channel 4. Again, no one reported any rapes except of the sort that had been brought to our attention earlier, of a man abusing his niece when her mother was away. Such incidents sadly take place all over the world, though the excessive proximity necessitated by camp conditions may give rise to them more often. That is precisely why the government engages in greater protection programmes in the camps along with its partners. With regard to the Sri Lankan military, which is what sensationalist media has tried to project, there were no allegations at all of rape, though the senior UNHCR officer mentioned allegations of prostitution. Again, prostitution is not unheard of elsewhere in Sri Lanka though, given the greater negative incentives life in a camp might provide, there is even greater onus on government and its partners to guard against this and protect those who might be propelled towards such activities by deprivation. UNHCR did note the allegation about the deaths of three women the previous month, reported to government in a briefing note on May 11th, which I had checked on previously when I visited the camps on May 2nd. I was told that the only woman under 60 amongst them had been in the Vavuniya hospital first and, after having been discharged from there, had died after suddenly having to enter one of the field hospitals. Apart from that, the UNHCR note of May 11th was concerned mainly with issues of release and family reunification, specific needs and the screening of former combatants. In all of these the suggestions made, for greater speed and transparency, are in accordance with government policy, but the great influx of displaced has slowed things down and disrupted the setting in place of the required systems. It was however heartening that UNICEF reported that the government had now provided ICRC with lists of those who had been placed in rehabilitation centres. On the issue of transfers from the conflict zone, the earlier allegation about abuse had now reduced to 'reports by IDPs that there may be some abuse of persons during the screening'. The earlier allegations had been checked on and, while they were refuted, there were commitments for even greater care to prevent any individual cases of abuse. Significantly there were no reports of any abuses in the intervening period. Why then the sensational reports that have burst out all over the world in the last few days? Is it that not only the Sri Lankan government but also the UN and the numerous agencies working in the camps are all in a state of denial about the horrors that intrepid British investigators have laid bare? The answer to this conundrum lies precisely in the very British character of the allegations. Those about abduction of children was first made by Charu Latha Hogg, reportedly with connections to British Intelligence, who had also been the first to allege indiscriminate attacks on civilians by the Sri Lankan forces. This was way back in 2007 when, masquerading as a tourist, she had produced a report for Human Rights Watch that was the first salvo in the battle to attack the integrity of the Sri Lankan government. This was shortly after the then British High Commissioner, Dominic Chilcott, began the campaign against Secretary of Defence Gothabaya Rajapakse, by lending credibility to reports that he had threatened the editor of a newspaper. Ironically, he seemed to concur when it was pointed out that it was unlikely the editor, a young lady, would have telephoned the Secretary when the call was cut off, if indeed she had been threatened. Charu Latha Hogg however demurred, and declared that of course a good journalist would have called back - i.e., she knew the young lady was not frightened but was determined to have a good story. Recalling that conversation two years later, I realise now that from that period, when first the Sri Lankan forces had shown they were able to take on the Tigers militarily, the British (even or perhaps specially so in the Hogg incarnation) were unduly antagonistic towards the Secretary of Defence. And, obviously, they were right to be thus antagonistic if their aim were, not the triumph of the Tigers, because even the British could not have been so silly seeing what happened with the Taliban, but their survival, so that the South Asian pot could be kept boiling. Am I being unduly imaginative? Possibly, but I have lived too long with the British, read too many of their brilliant analyses of their own foibles, to underestimate their infinite complexity. And I have learned too not to think of the British as a mass, for most of them are in fact extremely nice and sensible and sane, but they do have a tendency to be led astray by their more adventurous elements, Jameson in fact, Merrick in fiction, mad General Gordon in Khartoum, where fact and fiction blend in an analysis that only the British could themselves produce. So, whilst we should always remember that British policy is soon likely to change, and we can return to a much more trusting relationship, for the moment indications are

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that relentless denigration will continue. On the one hand we have the outrageous allegations that are spreading in the international media, all of them with British origins, the Hogg, the appropriately named Chamberlain, given associations with Nazism, either appeasement (Neville) or support (Houston Stewart), the relentless diatribes from the Times (Page and Bosleigh), Channel 4 and its rapes, these last not even bothering to ask for a Sri Lankan perspective on the propaganda they churn out. On the other hand we have the British driven determination to convene a special session on Sri Lanka of the United Nations Human Rights Council, a determination that has outlasted its original ostensible rationale, the safety of the civilians caught up in the conflict zone. Fortunately the British and their few close allies were not able to get enough signatures in time to hearten the Tigers (and thus cause even more suffering to the civilians, who were instead rescued en masse by the Sri Lankan forces). Nevertheless the campaign continued, ostensibly to address human rights issues and ensure a sustainable political solution. That certainly is the intention of the European Union, in talking about the Special Session, and Sri Lanka can have no quarrel with such intentions, though there are less aggressive ways of achieving this. But the intention of the British themselves is laid bare in David Miliband's speech in the House of Commons in which he declares that the post-conflict reconciliation process could be helped by investigation into alleged violations of international law. That innocuous statement was duly translated into simple English by the suspiciously well informed Page of the Times who asserted that 'Britain, the EU and the UN rights chief are calling for an investigation into whether Sri Lanka committed war crimes by firing on civilian targets, including hospitals. They won an early victory yesterday by persuading the necessary one third of the 47 members of the UN Human Rights Council to convene a special session next week.' In short, the British want Sri Lanka investigated for war crimes, a continuation of the process they began two years ago with the Hogg allegations and the Chilcott campaign against the Secretary of Defence. They also wanted then a resolution against Sri Lanka at the Human Rights Council, and were bitter when this was prevented. Now, after terrorism has been destroyed in Sri Lanka, they have returned once more to the chase. This is upsetting, because it is precisely the encouragement required by those elements in the Tamil diaspora which want the Tiger ethos revived. There are few of these, and the majority of overseas Tamils will gladly assist Sri Lanka, provided the present government moves swiftly towards reconciliation and rehabilitation, with remedies for the type of assault the Tamils suffered in the early eighties under a very different sort of government (beloved of course of the British). India, which stood steadfast against terror, whilst making clear its concern for Tamils, has already begun to work productively with the government to ensure a rapid return to normalcy. The United States, which also was forthright in its opposition to terror, whilst upholding the need for human rights, seemed to wobble under British pressure and even suggest negotiations with the Tigers, but it seems now to have returned to a less antagonistic posture and made clear its satisfaction that terrorism has been destroyed. Assistance therefore with positive measures to improve aspects that are unsatisfactory would be welcome, and we can hope soon to escape from the corrosive effects of terrorism that all countries recognise can detract at times from their own idealism too. In such a context it is hard to see a witch hunt as being only for the purpose of pressurising Sri Lanka to move towards reform, which seems to be the viewpoint of the more decent amongst the British. They should realise that such pressures rarely work, and can only lead to other pressures of a more dangerous sort. And most worrying is the message to the Tiger rump that all manner of things will be well, and they have only to continue with their own pressures to receive positive answers to their requests. We have already seen the results of such indulgence in the criminal activities that have occurred in so many countries. Surely it is time the international community, as it calls itself, made it clear that terrorism has been defeated. A legitimately elected government must now embark on a process of reconciliation, but this peculiar British method of building up a dossier to destroy it does not bode well for the future. Saddam Hussein may have been destroyed by such a dossier, and there may be no David Kelly to acknowledge guilt, even at the cost of his own life. Charu Latha Hogg and Gethin Chamberlain are not sensitive scientists, but rather hardened professionals in their fields, able to cut throats in print with no compunction. But, as we have seen recently with Colin Powell, good men who stoop to give credence to such irregularities can be ruined, and their loss to public life is deeply unfortunate. And, as President Obama has noted, the real war against terror had to suffer because of adventurism based on falsehoods. It would be tragic then if the adventurism of a few took away from the example of Sri Lanka in defeating terror, particularly if such adventurism led again to a resurgence of terror in the wrong places. Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha Secretary General Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process Courtesy: SCOPP