
Foolishness or cunning – indiscriminate allegations about civilian deaths

Tuesday, 26 May 2009

Last Updated Tuesday, 26 May 2009

We are told that the UN claims that about 7,000 civilians have been killed in fighting between the Sri Lankan forces and the LTTE over the last few months. It is also claimed that 16,700 have been wounded, ‘according to a UN document given to the Associated Press by a senior diplomat’.

This leak is the third in a series which has led to a state of denial by the UN. They claim that they are not responsible for any leaks, though they have still not reported to us on an investigation that was promised into the reports. More pertinently they have gone on record as saying that they know their figures are not reliable. Certainly, when this process first began, we sat down the head of security in Colombo who had produced the figures and found that many of them were based on extrapolation that had no rational basis. The process began with a figure in February of around 2,000 killed and over 4,000 wounded. Then, in March, when the High Commissioner for Human Rights got into the ring, it was 2,800 killed and more than 7,000 injured. By April it was nearly 6,500 civilians killed and 14,000 wounded. The latest figure then suggests agreement on a ratio of just over two to one with regard to wounded and killed, which makes sense in such conflict situations even if the figures themselves are suspect. Implicit in all this bandying about of figures is the assumption that the Sri Lankan government is responsible for all these deaths and also the injuries. Yet, obviously, there are three things that need to be verified before we can start the process of apportioning blame, blame that will stick given the small size of Sri Lanka, as opposed to blame that wafts away on a breezy apology, which we have seen in more brutal conflicts in recent days. First, are the figures of dead and injured accurate? Second, are they all attributable to the Sri Lankan forces, or might some of them at least have been inflicted by the LTTE? Third, are all those who died or were injured civilians? In dealing with these questions we see a remarkable lack of logic and of thought on the part of those determined to jump on a bandwagon to bash the Sri Lankan state. Let me try then to introduce some basic rationality into the discussion. As we have seen, there were more than twice as many injured as died through this year. However there seems to be no trace of the large figure now alleged for the last four months of 16,700. The ICRC brought off several shiploads of injured from the conflict zone from the beginning of February until the beginning of May, but of the 13,826 they conveyed only 5,499 were patients. Obviously the ICRC would not have brought out over 8,000 bystanders if there were injured waiting to come out. This suggests that the total number of deaths would in fact have been about 2,500, possibly 3,000 at most. Second, we have hard evidence of the LTTE both firing deliberately on civilians, and also not caring much about collateral damage. It is now forgotten that, in the last seven months of 2008, when the forces swept through half the north, and took Kilinochchi too after bitter battles, the total of civilian deaths alleged even by Tamilnet was just 78. It was only after that, when the LTTE had achieved its aim of corraling civilians together, that wanton destruction of civilians began. Before that, clearly, as had happened in the liberation of the East, the government had been able to ensure maintenance of its principle of minimal civilian casualties. The first date on which massive numbers of civilian deaths was alleged was January 26th, just after the government declared the first safe zone. Though initially when firing into the zone started the UN thought the government was responsible, UN Resident Coordinator Neil Buhne sent a text message at the end of the day to say that he believed most of the firing came from the LTTE. There is also the testimony of the Bishop of Jaffna who, while asking the government to extend the safe zone (which he would scarce have done if he believed the government were firing into it), said that he would also ask the LTTE to withdraw from the zone its own heavy weapons that were endangering the people. Apart from such collateral damage there were many occasions on which the LTTE fired on civilians trying to get away, using heavy weapons too as was seen in the pictures of the tank being deployed desperately on April 20th when the first large exodus began. And of course there is the testimony of so many in the camps, mentioned so often to visitors, forgotten by the sensationalist media. Finally, it must be clear to any thinking person that a great number of those who died would be LTTE fighters. After all, when TamilNet propagated claims of civilian deaths, they never gave numbers of cadres who had died. Nor did they give numbers of cadres who were wounded. Yet, obviously, many of those who engaged the forces for so long, especially in the area around Puthukudiyirippu, would have been hard core combatants. And to the number of those we have to add combatants who had been recently recruited. UNICEF has reported on these, UNDP has complained that the children of its staff were recruited, but no one has extrapolated from this the obvious fact that many civilians were forced to bear arms, and therefore were legitimate targets for the offensives of the armed forces. This had been made clear from early on, when the Army Commander explained why the LTTE still continued to fight ferociously even though it had lost so many people in battle in 2008 - youngsters in civilian clothes, obviously scarcely trained but carrying weapons, were found in profusion in bunkers along with regular cadres. This indeed heightens the guilt of those international agencies who refused, almost till the end of 2008, to condemn the LTTE for holding people hostage - they knew, as they had known for years, about forced conscription, but there was no public criticism of this, as the UN Resident Coordinator admitted, when he acknowledged that UN awareness that the LTTE was recruiting one person per family was not expressed publicly in 2007 (and when it was raised to 2 in 2008, there was an even more deafening silence). So it is obvious that a number of those who died in the last few months were combatants, bearing arms, having been forced into this by LTTE brutality and the ostensibly benign silence of the international agencies who had known what was happening, but said nothing. And, more pertinently, a number of those injured too would have been combatants. And yet, there are no LTTE combatants amongst the injured, not at least in any of the reports that are filed, the accusations that are made. All those injured, the more than 5,000 who were brought out by the ICRC, the rest who surrendered, are described as civilians. This is not unacceptable since, in the process of rehabilitation that the government plans, it is important not to hold their enforced recruitment against many of these youngsters. But at the same time it must be recognised that, when they were bearing arms against us, they were legitimate objects of attack. When we see that in theory then there are no LTTE wounded amongst those we are now caring for, we can understand how preposterous it is

to assume that there were no LTTE dead either. Except at the very end, when after we had managed to rescue almost all the civilians the hard core cadres fought and died, there were no accounts of LTTE dead in the propaganda that was churned out between January and April. But to believe that propaganda would be as ridiculous as to believe that all those injured, whom we are now treating in government hospitals all around the country, were civilians who were victims of government assaults. But people believe what they want to believe. Sensible extrapolation from the casualties who are now with us suggests that some of them must be combatants that many were wounded by LTTE action, and the number of dead must be less than the now oft tossed about figure that will soon become gospel. Certainly the number of civilian dead must be very much less, and amongst them those killed by collateral damage as opposed to the deliberate targeting of them by the LTTE as they tried to escape must be minimal. We have rescued 290,000, more than the figure of 250,000 that was being bandied about most often. We avoided the bloodbath that was predicted, that the LTTE tried to precipitate, especially on May 10th. We have confounded the world in dealing firmly with terrorism while preserving the lives of most of the civilians who were the most oppressed victims of terror. For this evidently we must suffer. But this is a small price to pay for what we have achieved. And we can but hope that, in time, those who with more power inflict greater suffering for the sake of what they see as the greater good will learn to try to emulate our actions. They must learn in the end to deal with terrorism while remembering that the people they are rescuing from terror are not to be 'othered', but to be treated as fellow human beings and thus fellow citizens in our common humanity. Prof Rajiva Wijesinha Secretary General Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process Courtesy: SCOPP