
Big Lies from the Big Boys

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Setting the Stage Last week, the Times of London announced that 20,000 civilians had died altogether in the course of this year because of the operations in the North. This claim was not surprising since, as I had just pointed out, the British were determined to crucify us and had already begun to inflate the figure. Six thousand had gone to seven and then to eight, in rapid succession, so more was inevitable, though the speed of the escalation was remarkable, even for the Brits. Predictably enough, the new figure began to reverberate round the Western World, with reference not to the Times but to its presumed sources.

These were as usual supposedly from the UN. From February on, the game had started, with the UN supposedly developing a count which was promptly leaked. Regularly the UN Resident Coordinator would bleat that the figures were just an extrapolation (i.e. completely made up, as his Security Coordinator admitted when we called him in and used logic and argument, elements with which he had evidently not been familiar with previously). Then he (the RC, not the SC - no bleater he - with a Boer determination, now evidently at the service of the British agenda) would bleat that certainly there had been no leak from his office, though he left it open whether there had been leaks in New York. Then he would bleat that he would hold an inquiry, though these never seemed to get off the ground, and we were always too nice to press him on his promises. And then the whole cycle would start again. This time around, there seems nothing for Buhne to bleat about, though it would be interesting to record his response if our Foreign Ministry were to call him in and get something on record instead of the customary sweet talk. This time, the Times claimed that it had gathered its own evidence, though with characteristic sleight of hand it tried to draw the UN in too - 'The UN estimated that 7,000 people were killed in the first four months of this year; the figure now appears to be at least 20,000'. There was no note there that the 7000 was not an official UN figure, and that the 20,000 had nothing to do with the UN, unless it were gossipy underlings of the (both British) Dix and Campbell sort Buhne had to repudiate and get rid of, so hysterical were their emotions, so biased their assertions. The UN then does not have much to answer for in this instance. But their reaction, which is defensive, plays straight into the hands of the Times, since it allows others to declare that something is fishy and the Times allegations must be investigated. Conjuring tricks - extrapolating from extrapolations How exactly then did Catherine Page (or whichever groupie did the calculations) arrive at this magic figure of 20,000? The first article was extraordinarily vague. The manner in which the groupie uses language merits careful study - 'Some civilians were probably killed by the Tigers, whose brutality and ruthlessness over the past 28 years has fully justified their depiction as terrorists. Finding out what happened, however, is impossible: the army has barred entry to all outsiders. Food is short, sanitation appalling; wounded and traumatised civilians are in desperate need of help. That much is clear from those who have been able to escape. More sinister reports are now circulating of systematic 'disappearances' of families separated and young men taken away. But until the Government allows in aid workers, the presumption must be that it wants nothing to be heard or seen of what is going on.' This tactic was used in the final push to beat the Tigers.' The language used provides a fascinating study in obfuscation. The transition from the past-tense to the present is intended to create the impression that the description is of the present situation in the welfare camps, where those who were rescued from the Tigers are housed. The second part of the paragraph, with its mention of the reports that British media outlets have been putting out with increasing shrillness, clearly applies to the current situation. In the process we lose sight of the fact that those who managed to escape, did in fact escape from the Tigers, and the hostage situation the British seemed to wish to perpetuate in refusing to follow the rest of the world and call upon the Tigers to surrender. All this confusion has the effect, as doubtless intended, of drawing attention away from the absence of any argument to justify the newly inflated figure of 20,000. The text itself refers to hundreds of fresh graves, and apart from that there is no trace of argument for the new numbers. This came later, first through a remarkably silly assertion that, to the earlier (and in any case, unverified) 7,000, there had to be added 1,000, a day which was what the UN was claimed (again with no verification) to have estimated. The Times itself, on the 30th, produced an even more lunatic argument, also worth quoting in full - 'The figures have been collated from deaths reported by priests or doctors and added to a count of the bodies brought to medical points. Of the total, the bodies collected, accounted for only a fifth of the reported deaths. After the bombing intensified this month, the only numbers available were by a count of the bodies. The 20,000 figure is an extrapolation based on the actual body count'. Put in simple English, that means that the Times believes there were 4,000 bodies in May, which they multiplied by 5 to get at the figure they tossed into cyberspace. Even more astonishingly, it would seem that the earlier figures are based on reports from individuals, identified as priests or doctors, which were then added to bodies brought to medical points. This suggests there were 'doctors' not at medical points who added their stories to 'verifiable' bodies, also presumably reported by doctors. At all stages the figures were the highest possible that could be put together, and the failure to identify bodies to substantiate these claims was then turned into another instrument of aggression, to justify actual (or rather reportedly) verified figures to be multiplied by five. The historical continuity of the current Western approach Underlying this balderdash is the assumption that only callow Western reporters care about Tamils. This I find particularly irritating, since I have been concerned about Sri Lankan treatment of minorities long before it became fashionable. I remember taking Radhika Coomaraswamy, now wailing and gnashing her teeth because there is no war crimes probe, to task more than a quarter of a century ago because she kept quiet about what the J.R. Jayewardene government was doing to the Tamils. I could understand family gratitude, since I have been told regularly how well J.R. treated her father Raju, but that was no excuse for the International Centre for Ethnic Studies keeping quiet about what was happening to Tamils in the early eighties. Radhika explained that ICES was allowed to operate on the condition that it would not look at internal problems - a compromise I found shabby - and which I described as such in an article at the time. Fortunately the situation changed after 1983, but even then Radhika operated through a different body that she had set up called the

Committee for Rational Development, for which responsibility was entrusted to a younger, but still idealistic and clear-thinking Dayan Jayatilake. Now ICES has swung the other way, and even Mrs Tiruchelvam, forgetting how her determinedly anti-terrorist husband died, hankers after tying the Sri Lankan government up in knots for daring to go after his killers. But ambition makes strange bedfellows of us all, and the West and ICES which connived at the oppression of the Tamils and of democracy in the early eighties, when Cold War compulsions held sway, now wish to perpetuate a patronising unipolarity through an even more ruthless hypocrisy. Comparisons with intelligent and concerned monitoring Our own approach has been equally consistent, care for all our people, criticism of those who wish to abandon our sovereignty and betray our friends on whose defence of our common interests we can rely. I make no apologies, and now I do not need to, for the consistently pro-Indian sentiments I have expressed for nearly 30 years, and for having my first novel and my first political history published in India, way back in 1985 and 1986, when the Sri Lankan printer thought my direct critique of the Jayewardene government for the 1983 anti-Tamil riots too dangerous to publish. In the same spirit, I have, at the Peace Secretariat, monitored TamilNet - all allegations of harm to civilians caused by military offensives, and asked the forces for explanations as necessary. That is how I could say proudly that, until the end of 2008, our record was the best in the world, even on a worst-case scenario - for surely TamilNet would not have omitted any possible charge. I should note that, while my staff may have missed an item or two, the al-Jazeera reporters who compared my lists with theirs thought I had covered pretty much everything (and they were British, though obviously not paid by the British). There were only 78 civilian deaths alleged in all army operations in the last seven months of 2008. In over 400 airstrikes, there were fewer than 20 in which there were even allegations of civilian deaths, and in all such cases I was promptly given information of the target taken, and the distance from regular civilian areas. Of course, no one could guarantee that there were no civilians in military installations, but I also know that my other staff complained that even when precise locations were provided, the air force would not strike if there were civilian dwellings nearby. I should therefore take this opportunity to pay tribute to the decency of our forces, who never lost sight of the fact that these civilians were our people. The situation changed after January, and while of course there must have been some collateral damage, given the way the LTTE had set up (with some connivance from some Western elements) their hostages, the evidence also shows clearly how much damage the LTTE themselves caused, and how they forced civilians into the battle lines. Obviously they wanted as many civilian casualties as possible, and that explains both their callousness and the inflated figures, which even our now worst enemies cannot claim are substantiated by body counts even in the tiny area to which the LTTE and its vicious leadership were finally confined. Yet with all this desire to inflate figures and play on (or add support to) gullible (or bitter) Western feelings, TamilNet allegations in May give far lower figures for civilian casualties than the Times groupies wish to perpetuate. In the first weekend in May, they alleged 64 deaths. Then there was a lull until the 8th when 47 deaths were alleged. That, it will be remembered, is when there began again an exodus of civilians after the LTTE had brought the shutters down after the mass exodus in the latter part of April. Forty-seven is indicative not of a barrage by the Sri Lankan forces, but of LTTE killing with small arms as 1000 civilians fled. On the 9th, the LTTE brought out its heavy weapons, and for a short time they succeeded in stopping the flood. I believe the Sri Lankan forces had a moral obligation to quell the heavy weaponry, but for the moment they failed, and, while claiming that 1,200 had been killed, the LTTE brought down the shutters again. The Times probably does not understand enough about logic to work out who benefited from these deaths, and the stopping of civilian escapes, but unless it has completely forgotten its basic arithmetic, it will understand that until May 10th, the TamilNet allegations amounted to fewer than 1,300 deaths, not 10,000 on the assumption of 1,000 a day. The Times may believe that TamilNet was now in the pay of the Sri Lankan government, or wicked non-Western countries, and that the Times and its little friends in the UN know better, but any government that does not see this as a worst-case scenario is obviously working to a perverse agenda. After the weekend, the figure was raised to 3,200 by a TRO spokesman, referring to Sunday night to Monday morning, but this was not taken up elsewhere, and it is not clear whether he was referring again to the carnage caused by the LTTE stopping of the escape earlier in the weekend. Over the next few days there were new allegations about a hospital being hit, with varying figures for deaths of 38, 47 (the same figure as ten days previously) and over 100, the smallest coming at the end. While this drama was going on, the Sri Lankan forces made another breach in the defences, and over 5,000 got away on May 14th. So, on the 14th, there was yet another TamilNet claim of 1,700 killed, though significantly enough it claimed that this was over the previous 48 hours. After that we simply had mass hysteria, with a claim by the Sea Tiger Leader Soosai, whose wife had got away by sea with several relations and plenty of money, that 25,000 were 'injured to death'. That claim was repeated on TamilNet on the 17th, along with the assertion that the forces preferred to kill those who were fleeing, a strange assertion given how many were helped to safety. That figure could not be the basis of the Times assertion, unless they decided that Soosai was exaggerating and they reduced his figure by a mathematical formula they had worked scientifically, as they did their one for extrapolating deaths from bodies they accepted on trust from unidentified sources. Omitting this last claim then, it is clear that TamilNet has much to learn from the Times about how to make up figures. Or perhaps we were wrong to think that TamilNet figures are of a worst possible case, and actually they have been lying throughout to conceal the true depths of Sri Lankan iniquity, which only the Times and its unnamed informants can truly fathom. Whatever the explanation, the Times decided to go out on a limb last week. They were justified in their view of Western gullibility, for their speculative figure, justified subsequently in the shadiest way (or rather ways, for good measure), has now become gospel in what purport to be influential Western eyes. Sir John Holmes, in Sri Lanka, warned us we had to expect this type of behaviour from newspapers. The war was over, they were sitting in Colombo with nothing to do. But the way in which the Times in general, and a couple of correspondents from other places, have made things up relentlessly, suggests something more than just pique and anxiety for sensation. They are determined, together with their friends in low places in the UN, and high places elsewhere, to put pressure on senior officials, and then misreport what they say - as we have seen happen already, when John Colville speaks for Navanethem Pillay and she and John Holmes are alleged to want a war crimes

inquiry, and the Secretary General is pilloried for not being tough, i.e. not doing exactly what a few Western countries want. Over the next few days, those countries will try to build on what the Times has started. More recent articles suggest what the agenda is, and I shall look at that next. But for the moment we have clear evidence that what is termed the independent international media is partisanly parochial. Rajiva Wijesinha Secretary General Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process