Urgent treatment for misleading information

Wednesday, 24 June 2009
Last Updated Wednesday, 24 June 2009

The following letter was sent to the British Medical Journal in response to an article by a Dr. Shiamala Suntharalingam, which provided much misleading information as to the situation in the North. The Editor - British Medical Journal Dear Sir I write with reference to the article entitled ‘Sri Lanka: health as a weapon of war?’ by Shiamala Suntharalingam, which appeared recently in your columns. Her article is replete with inaccuracies and misleading preconceptions, so I would be grateful if you would allow me space to refute her claims.
Schools are operating in the camps and IDP teachers are employed there. In her first paragraph, she declares that ‘Throughout the conflict successive governments have used access to medicines as a weapon of war against the Tamils who were living outside the military controlled areas in the Tamil North East of the island’. She is referring here to the areas that were controlled by the LTTE, which is a terrorist organization banned in Britain as well as in over twenty other Western countries. The elected Sri Lankan Government in 2002 signed a Ceasefire Agreement which was meant to ensure negotiations but the Tigers, as the LTTE is commonly known, withdrew from negotiations in 2003. Instead they used the foolhardy goodwill of the then Government to strengthen their control of the areas in which, it will be noted, Dr. Suttharalingam, doubtless idealistically, offered her services in 2003. She would know that in fact medical services in those areas were provided by the Government, which continued to maintain hospitals, pay salaries of all those who worked in them, and supply medicines and ancillary services throughout the entire period in which the Tigers physically controlled those areas. We did the same with education and all other social and other services. Dr. Suntharalingam is therefore lying when she declares that ‘Since 2006 the Sri Lankan Government and its Armed Forces have systematically blocked the provision of clean water, shelter, food, and medicines by civil organizations as well as local and international Non-Governmental organizations (NGOs)’. This omits what we provided, but there was also plenty more as indeed her next sentence proves when she says that ‘In 2008 all international NGOs working in the northern region of Vanni, including Medicines Sans Frontieres, were ordered out.’ That happened in September 2008, more than two years after the doctor’s cut off date, but that too was because the Government could no longer guarantee their safety following the explosion of a claymore mine which damaged one of three vehicles of the Norwegian organization FORUT, which had been delayed several hours at a Tiger checkpoint before being permitted to proceed after dusk. Fortunately, in a practice we have since discovered was quite common, the damaged vehicle had only one driver travelling in it at the time. It is certainly wrong of Dr. Suntharalingam to claim that ‘It became a war without any witnesses’ since the ICRC continued to operate in the area, while two UN agencies which had been invited to remain declined to do so themselves, but went in at regular intervals for six months or so, to convey food and medicine. Dr. Suntharalingam is talking nonsense when she says that ‘Sri Lankan authorities denied access to the North and East for long-term relief and rehabilitation projects by NGOs’ after the tsunami, as can be seen from the millions spent in those areas in the past five years. However there is little to show for these monies, and audited accounts are rarely available, leading to the inescapable conclusion that those funds, like many others intended for the Tamil people oppressed and conscripted by the LTTE were spent on the massive stockpiles of weapons that were discovered even after several months in which the Tigers used those weapons ruthlessly, including on those Tamils who tried to flee from them. It is wrong to say that ‘Almost 280,000 Tamil men, women, and children surrendered to the Sri Lankan military’ since these people arrived seeking refuge, having tried for months to flee the LTTE but being prevented from doing so, as they have testified again and again to the visitors who have spoken to them. Even advocacy groups with no sympathy for the Government, such as the Jaffna University Teachers for Human Rights, acknowledge that the Tigers brutally held these people as hostages for months, driving them into ever shrinking spaces to use them as and when needed. When the good doctor declares that ‘The officials refer to these people as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)’, she reveals her hand, because that is what the world calls them, whereas terrorist sympathizers, who evidently wish to revive the LTTE, believe they are citizens of a mythical Eelam. She is right in saying that those who have not yet been security cleared are not allowed to leave, but they are certainly permitted to communicate with the outside world, not only with the over 50 external agencies operating in the camps but also with journalists and other visitors, as well as through telephonic communication (which is how the British health worker, erroneously described in despatches from the front as a doctor, informed her family who finally stirred the British High Commission into action on her behalf). Schools are operating in the camps and IDP teachers are employed in them. This was intended from the start, though structures have been slow to get off the ground because of the vast numbers that came in and also because UNICEF, which undertook the responsibility, was slower in setting up areas for schools than we had anticipated. She is quite wrong about claiming that the ‘official pronouncement is that these people will be kept under these conditions for the next three years or so’ since the Government plans to resettle them as soon as possible, 80 per cent during this year, though of course removing the mines the LTTE laid will take time and that exercise may not be fully completed for a couple of years. Thankfully, the doctor notes her source for the most shaky of her claims, in saying that ‘Women have been separated from their families and sexually abused, according to Britain’s Channel 4’. The Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights, of which I am the Secretary, is in charge of Protection, and we work on this with the UN and several NGOs. None have suggested any rationale for the Channel 4 story, which was telecast without any attempt to ask for Government comment. Certainly, people had been separated from their families in many instances by the time they came into the camps, but the Government is reunifying them, and has succeeded in doing so with several thousands already. With regard to sexual abuse, the incidents relate to problems amongst IDPs, which have been brought to our attention, along with suggestions for preventive action which has been taken. Dr. Suntharalingam may claim that this is all she meant to convey, but if so she is not being honest, since her source was clearly trying to suggest that Sri Lankan servicemen were responsible.

That there has been no trace of this was certified by all protection partners. The doctor is again talking nonsense in claiming that Tamil doctors were refused access to the area, though she may indeed have heard such a thing from her sources. The fact is that, for many years, Tamil speaking doctors who were appointed to these areas were unwilling to serve, and indeed they were at greater risk from the Tigers than their colleagues in the Government Service, since they were branded as traitors if they did not give full allegiance to the LTTE. The Government has continued to post several doctors to the area, and in particular those who speak Tamil, while others work on a voluntary basis on programs organized by several NGOs. Though obviously there is a massive need for medical services, these have been generally satisfactory, and none of the epidemics predicted with such glee by the Tigers and their supporters have occurred. The UN Secretary General was in fact referring, through the word ‘appalling’ which the doctor leaps on joyfully’ not to the camps but to the area in which the Tigers held thousands of hostages to fight their last battle. The UN acknowledges that access has improved, after being subjected to security safeguards following a couple of instances of abuse. Meanwhile, MSF assure me that the quote the doctor uses from Severine Ramon, coordinator for Medicines Sans Frontieres, was taken out of context, a common practice in those who wish to denigrate Sri Lanka but wish to throw the burden of this on others.It should be noted that such techniques are sometimes successful in adversely affecting relations between the Government and NGOs, to the delight of characters such as Dr. Suntharalingam who evidently wants her critique to prove true at some stage in the ideal future she imagines, in which only the murderous Tigers are left in charge of these poor civilians. It should be noted too that the Government doctors to whom she refers are of course being questioned, as for instance the British did with P G Wodehouse after the Second World War, in which he had been forced to say things to satisfy his Nazi captors. Whilst there is obvious need to check on whether they should be prosecuted for providing material used by a murderous enemy, we can hope that the defence used in the case of Wodehouse, that pressures had been applied to which it would be unreasonable to expect resistance, will be found applicable, and they can return to their generally admirable work. Finally, Dr. Suntharalingam is obviously ignorant that the Government has been working with the ILO on a framework for the rehabilitation of those she describes as LTTE fighters, which includes several who were forcibly conscripted. The IDPs have told us horrific stories of how they strove to keep their children hidden to prevent conscription, a practice in which sadly several NGOs connived, only raising objections (and indeed attempting to justify this pusillanimity) when the children of their employees were being rounded up. Dr. Suntharalingam is certainly welcome to contribute to the fund for rehabilitation, and I hope she will choose to do this, instead of encouraging the rump of the LTTE that still functions in several European countries, and most prominently in Britain, to continue to stockpile weapons in its effort to sacrifice yet another generation of the poor amongst the Tamils for their dream of a puppet state they can control from abroad. Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha Secretary General, Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process