
British Foreign Office feeds Times false figures in campaign to recover from defeat at HRC in Geneva

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The above headline is clearly an exaggeration, but it is based on the style of reporting adopted recently by the Times of London in its coverage of Sri Lanka. Following its extraordinary assertion, at the end of May, that over 20,000 had been killed in the conflict area, it seemed necessary to examine the motives behind such whopping untruths. The investigation revealed a culture of secretiveness and propagandist zeal that is not of course novel, given the role that some newspapers have played in the past in supporting British adventurism, as instigated by particular political parties. An expedition to London found that the Times itself was unwilling to provide access. Like Channel 4, which had been equally fraudulent, it kept its doors tight shut. However four other journals and two TV channels were more open, and provided some explanation of the deceit practiced by the Times. "The Times is in the pocket of New Labour," said one senior journalist. "They get all their material from the Foreign Office." Another journalist speculated that the British Foreign Office was furious at the own goal it had achieved in Geneva, when its efforts to instigate a Special Session against Sri Lanka, and then to have a critical resolution passed, backfired when the whole Third World combined to administer a stinging rebuke. Even the Americans had advised against such folly, but thinking that Britain had asserted its primacy with regard to South Asia over the new American administration, David Miliband had forged (that being the operative word) ahead. Failure had then prompted a determination to take revenge, hence the unleashing of the Times. Other commentators however opined that Foreign Office professionals had not been in favour of the move, and that more seasoned diplomats, though they had had to succumb to New Labour pressure, were pleased that the rebuke had allowed greater weight to more enlightened professional opinion. Their view was that positive engagement, based on British concern for Human Rights, but without any devious political agenda, which could also be seen as threatening to India, would achieve more in ensuring that Sri Lanka adhered to its traditional policy of neutrality. Though for some weeks the saner minds in the Foreign Office had seemed to prevail, the latest effusion in the Times suggests that its handlers are once again champing at their own bits. Now the claim is that "about 1,400 people a week are dying at one of the big internment camps," This is attributed to "Senior international aid figures," though as usual the Times is unwilling to name these mythical figures. The response of the UN Resident Coordinator to this claim was "Ridiculous," and he could not even guess as to how the Times had arrived at this figure. It was possible he said that a zero had been added on, but even 140 was higher than the actual figure. Currently it averages under 5 deaths a day, while in the period from May 1st it has been 618 altogether, with higher figures in May when there was an influx, just as there had been averages of over 10 a day in the first few days after the massive influx of April 20th onward. 618 deaths in 75 days out of a total of nearly 300,000 people is not especially strange, and well within the SPHERE norms for such situations. The Times, or perhaps its minders, who have smuggled in their agents in the guise of aid workers (at massive salaries, it should be noted, and relentlessly disruptive of the good work of most aid agencies), knows how to introduce figures by sleight of hand. The figures it now confidently attributes to the UN were leaked, and that from tentative extrapolations, and UN Emergency Relief Coordinator John Holmes has made it clear that they were never formally issued because they were only estimates. Holmes went further in totally repudiating the Times claim about over 20,000 dead, when he said that it had no basis in anything said or recorded by the UN. In fact the Times had cleverly tried to insinuate that the UN was responsible for that figure by first citing the leaked UN figure of 7,000 for the first four months of the year, and then using a semi-colon (how Orwell would have relished that!) to assert that there was an average of 1,000 a day over the next two weeks. Some gullible papers had then claimed UN authority for the 20,000, though fortunately that canard has now been nailed, and when it recurs, generally only in the Times, it is now attributed to the Times alone. The reason for the current attack may be related to the admission of doctors who had been in the conflict area that they had lied about casualty figures under Tiger pressure. That this was happening had been evident at the time but, though the Sri Lankan government had noted this, the Times and its allies had cited such figures as gospel. It was only after the admission of the doctors that the Times finally noted that "It would be surprising if the Tigers, who were no slouches when it came to the manipulation of the media, had not attempted to modify the doctors' testimonies." This belated admission was made however only to claim that the Tigers and the Government are just like each other. What is bizarre is that, if the Times, albeit through a series of what are in effect self-effacing double negatives, grants that the Tigers got the doctors to make things up, it now blames the government for having the doctors issue a corrective. Such correctives would never have been necessary if the Times and its minders had made it clear from the start that the figures cited by the doctors under Tiger duress were unreliable. And, interestingly enough, even this concession seems to be missing from later versions of the article, since obviously nothing should take away from the assault on the government. After all the doctors had been brought into play over the 20,000 figure, even though it had nothing whatsoever to do with them. Any study of the chronology would have made that clear, but the Times assumes that its readers are not going to study anything, and that the bigger the lie, and the more diabolical the insinuation, the more likely it is that it will be repeated by gullible followers. Thus the Times claims that "The United Nations found that more than 7,000 civilians were killed between January and May. Subsequent aerial photographs of beach graves, revealed in The Times, suggested that the figure was more than 20,000. World outrage embarrassed the Colombo Government. The doctors were swiftly arrested and nothing further was heard of them until Wednesday." This ignores the fact that the "revelation" in the Times, passed off as having UN authority, occurred at the end of the week in May in which the New Labour initiative in Geneva had so dismally failed. The doctors had been arrested over 10 days earlier, as they escaped the conflict zone together with thousands of other civilians when Tiger resistance finally collapsed, and the cadres stopped ‐ to a great extent if not totally ‐

firing on the fleeing masses they had held hostage for so long. This hostage taking, it should be noted, was with the connivance of the Times and its Tiger sympathizers (as described by senior Sri Lankan journalists) such as Marie Colvin.

Why does the Times love the Tigers so much, to the extent of suppressing initially and subsequently what they did with the doctors? Why does it hate the Sri Lankan government to the extent of telling ridiculous lies, as described by senior responsible aid officials? Why does it twist evidence and chronology, hell bent it seems on attacking the government with no regard for journalistic or even basic human ethics? The answer obviously lies in its political agenda. No wonder that a senior British diplomat, when told that a Conservative victory was anxiously awaited, said the sentiments were widely shared. A professional Foreign Office needs better leadership than it has now, it needs better agents than the Times in its current phase of amoral secretive falsehood. It is no wonder that other journalists said there was no reason to worry about the Times, since its circulation was very small. But still, as with Browning on Wordsworth, Byron on Venice, those who remember past glories can only weep at what the current management of the Times has done, in enslaving past glory to New Labour manipulation. To paraphrase the Times itself, 'It would be surprising if New Labour, who are no slouches when it came to the manipulation of the media, had not attempted to pervert the reporting of the Times'. Prof Rajiva Wijesinha Secretary General Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process

Courtesy: SCOPP