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Special Rapporteurs leap on the bandwagon

Prof Rajiva Wijesinha

The Peace Secretariat is not entirely surprised by a recent statement of several United Nations Special Rapporteurs, which is of a piece with a recent campaign to rouse emotions about and against Sri Lanka. It is however disappointed that the Rapporteurs have not stopped to think that such statements may deprive Sri Lanka of the peace it has long sought, and which now seems so near.

In particular, the dramas that are now going on in the offices and drawing rooms of Geneva will send a message to the Tigers that they do not need to surrender. Though they were long ago asked to do this by the Co-Chairs assisting Sri Lanka in the Peace Process, the recent refusal to request this, when prompted to do so by the BBC, of one of those politicians purportedly concerned about the Sri Lankan people has made clear that different agendas may now be involved.

Though Special Rapporteurs obviously have an obligation to respond to concerns brought to them, this is generally done through cooperation with member states of the United Nations. Sri Lanka has always cooperated when problems are brought to its attention, and recently has striven to respond promptly to any questions.



The campaign which strengthens the LTTE in its resolve not to surrender, will further torment those civilians still amongst it. AFP

It has also sought meetings with Rapporteurs who have seemed especially concerned, and the fruits of its cooperation can be seen in current programs conducted in collaboration with the Office of the High Commissioner as well as with the displaced, though there was intransigence about this earlier on the part of the UN.

It is true that Sri Lanka has not as yet responded to letters of April 29, 30. As Secretary to the Disaster Management and Human Rights Ministry I had intended to do so last weekend, but had to travel to the camps, where indeed those who were working round the clock asked if we could provide someone able to communicate in English the work that is going on as well as the problems that are faced.

Sadly such a person is not easy to find, since those with sufficient command of English to satisfy interlocutors at Special Rapporteur level will not generally work for the Government, and very rarely in the affected areas. That is why, as representatives of what is termed the international community put it, Sri Lanka is losing the propaganda war.

However, as the President put it, this is a propaganda war being fought abroad, whereas his responsibility is to his people, and his concern is to serve their needs as best possible. That he is doing this to the satisfaction of the country at large is clear. What is sad is that this international community is losing the battle for the hearts and minds of our people, and it does not seem to care.

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And they should not think that this refers only to one section of the population, such feelings are shared also by representatives of minorities amongst politicians and civil society workers who are concerned with the plight of their fellows abused for so long by the LTTE, without a word of criticism about actual incidents of abuse by those who cannot even now categorically call upon the LTTE to surrender, so that the rest of our suffering fellow citizens can be freed.

Whilst I was busy last week dealing with a host of international visitors in addition to regular and special work, I also did not realize that a reply was urgently needed, given the tardiness of the Special Rapporteurs to respond to previous interactions. The Rapporteur on Extra-Judicial Killings had not for instance responded to my previous letter to him in 2008, and I thought he had forgotten us, though it is good to know that we can rely on him to turn up in a crisis.

I have not had the pleasure previously of meeting the rest of the Rapporteurs who have struck now, even though I have communicated with some.

Sadly, none of them indicated that a meeting would have been desirable when I was in Geneva in March for the Human Rights Council. I could then have dealt in detail with some of the queries they raise.

It has always been our policy to engage, but I now realize that perhaps such engagement is useless in as much as the Rapporteurs, without waiting even a few days for a response to the concerns they had raised at the very end of April, felt compelled by those who believe there is no other way of achieving their ends to raise issues publicly.

Given the campaign being conducted against the Sri Lankan State in Geneva now, a campaign which will strengthen the LTTE in its resolve not to surrender, to fight on, to further torment those civilians still amongst it, I should have realized that pressures for this purpose would be brought.

I will however seek to meet all these Rapporteurs, in a special trip to Geneva I am now compelled to make. Attached to this statement meanwhile are responses to their letters which should make clear the enormous efforts we make under difficult circumstances.

The Rapporteurs must realize that here the problems of the displaced have come on top of a hostage crisis, which was never properly addressed. Despite this the services provided have been successful in dealing with immediate problems, though as mentioned we believe standards could be higher, and the United Nations must not assume that minimum standards are enough in all instances.

Particularly for people treated badly for so long, with complacency if not connivance on the part of international officials meant to care for their welfare, higher standards must be sought.

I hope therefore that in meetings in Geneva we could discuss our concerns as well as theirs, and work out how we can help our people, without helping the LTTE to continue with its wicked ways.

Allowing this last to continue would be culpable wickedness on our part, and on the part of any who assist in manoeuvres that would permit such extreme callous terrorism to continue.

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