



My Ref.

HCL/Media/16

10 June 2009

Mr. Robert Cole
The Editor
The Times
1, Pennington Street
London E98 1TT

Dear Mr. Cole,

The Times Coverage on Sri Lanka – 19 May 2009 Onwards

I wish to draw your attention to the Times coverage on Sri Lanka with special reference to its reports on 19th May and onwards. Your special attention is kindly drawn to the front page article "The Hidden Massacre" and the editorial "Slaughter in Sri Lanka" and other reporting by Catherine Philp from Sri Lanka and Jeremy Page from New Delhi and the three editorials on 19th, 29th and 30th May.

The aim and objective of the Times coverage appears to be to bring about the following in the mind of the reader:

1. There have been 20 000 civilians killed in Sri Lanka's war zone during the last phase of the war contrary to the accepted reports.
2. They have been killed mainly due to the government forces shelling indiscriminately.

In order to establish the above your paper has made a tremendous effort using extensive space. You have used a few photographs taken when your diplomatic correspondent Catherine Phillip was in Sri Lanka accompanying the UNSG Mr. Ban Ki-Moon to substantiate your argument. [Strangely, none other person in the same helicopter with Ms. Philp has raised concern about similar things] Mr. Jeremy Page has tried to supplement and analyse the facts from New Delhi, India.

However, above accusations the Times has tried to level against the Government of Sri Lanka are false.

1. The number of 20 000 civilian casualties is false and the Times was not able to substantiate the figure with any verifiable document or source. The Times has only referred to 'secret UN documents' which does not exist. In fact the UN has responded to the Times report negating the allegations:

- UN Secretary General has said to the UN General Assembly on 1 June that the media reports alleging that some 20,000 civilians may have been killed during the last phase of the conflict “do not emanate from the UN and most are not consistent with the information at our disposal.”

Source: UN News Centre > www.un.org/news

- Sir John Holmes, the UN, Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator said on 31 May "That figure [20,000] has no status as far as we're concerned,"

Source: Al Jazeera (English) www.aljazeera.com/english

- Spokesperson for UNSG, Ms. Michele Montas on 1 June at the noon press briefing said that “In the month of May we had absolutely no way of knowing what the casualty figure was. The number of 20,000 is not a UN number” [The Spokesperson later added that as regards to the media reports on the figure of 20,000 civilian casualties in Sri Lanka, it was verified with the concerned United Nations staff who were present at meetings of United Nations senior officials that no such internal report was made at those meetings]

Source: UN web Site>

<http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs/2009/db090601.doc.htm>

- On 29th May 2009 at the noon press briefing Ms. Marie Okabe, Deputy Spokesperson for UNSG said “Okay, on that, first of all, the media reports of the latest figures that you’re speaking to, I did check with OCHA and they do not know where these specific figures are coming from”.

Source: UN web Site>

<http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs/2009/db090501.doc.htm>

2. As the number 20 000 is false the allegation that the Government did kill them does not arise at all. However, **for further clarification, you could refer to the annexure to this letter.**

Your reporter depends on only one civilian as evidence from the IDP’s and she does not confirm whether this person was objective and not sympathetic to the LTTE, which is a decisive factor here. Even if the benefit of the doubt is given to Ms. Philip, her report itself has many discrepancies in it. I would like to highlight

one example; in her article "How our photographs exposed the lies over civilian deaths on beach" on 29th May she says that 'In one day, when the names of 198 dead were collected, only 39 bodies were taken to the medical centre'. Isn't this a proof that the number of casualties reported by the Times is questionable?

Your 'independent defence experts' can never identify the bodies of the people who are allegedly buried under just by seeing the alleged burial mounds in an aerial photograph or two. Therefore, it is not fair to allege that the 'bodies' allegedly buried are civilians' killed by the government shelling. It is cynical to allege the government of killing civilians where no authentic documentary evidence, adequate personal evidence or any other evidence is sufficiently provided, other than these few photographs.

You may recall that the High Commission arranged a meeting for Ms. Philp and Mr. Michael Evans, The Times Defence Editor to meet the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Sri Lanka Rohitha Bogollagama last week. Following the meeting, the Times carried an article on 6 June, which did not give sufficient prominence to the Minister's remarks denying the allegations by the Times. Instead the Times reported that the Minister was remarking 'angrily' which was quite contrary to the demeanour of the Minister at the discussion. He was courteous and answered every query by Ms. Philp and Mr. Evans.

In light of the above, I wish to request you to publish, with due prominence, a correction based on the facts we have forwarded with this letter.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,



Justice Nihal Jayasinghe
High Commissioner

Cc: 1. Ms. Catherine Philp, Diplomatic Correspondent, The Times
2. Mr. Michael Evens, Defence Editor, The Times