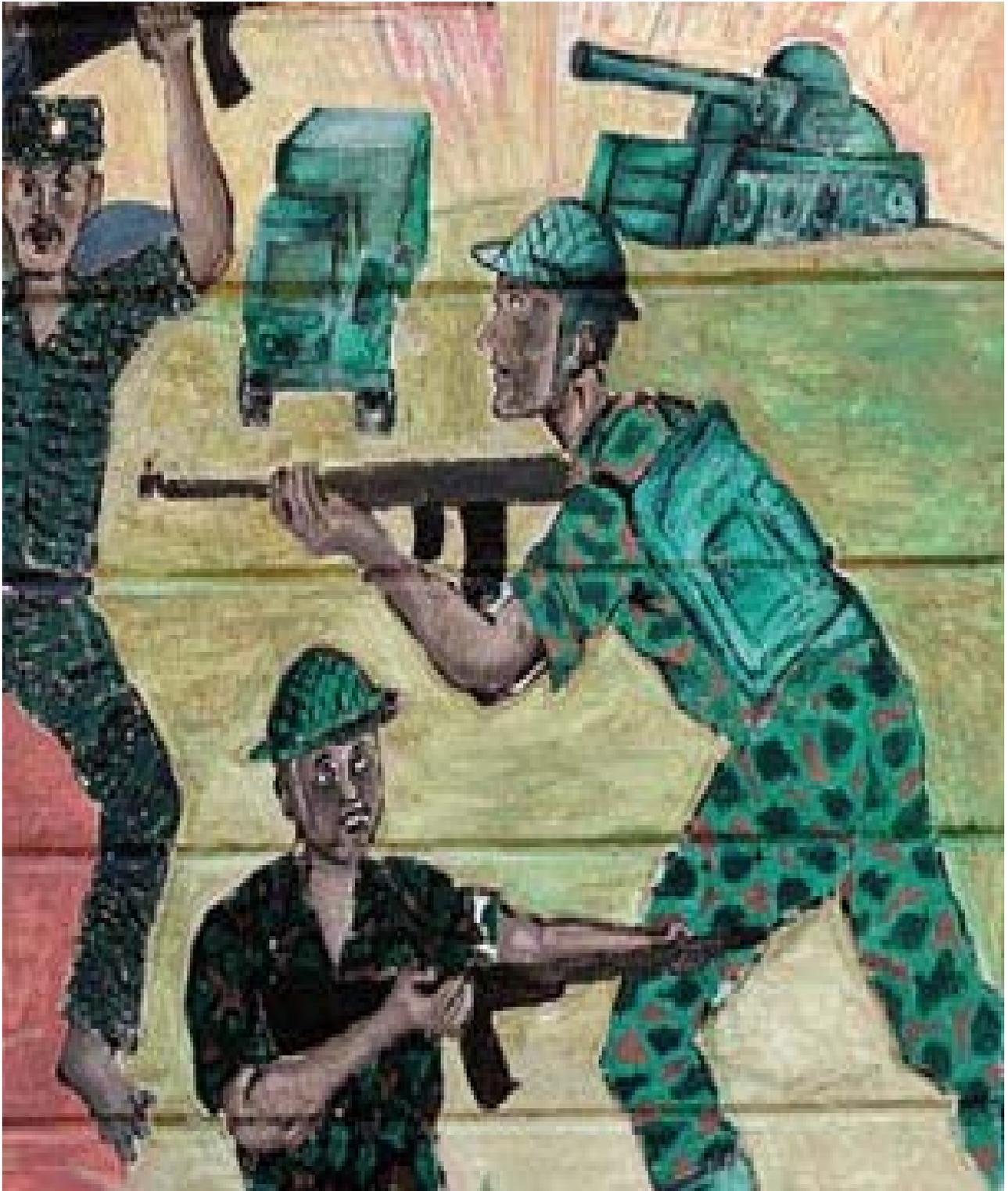


RECOUNTING THE LIES



FRANCES HARRISON, THE LTTE AND SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka Media Watch, a project of Engage Sri Lanka, October 2012

Sri Lanka Media Watch is a project of **Engage Sri Lanka**. It was established to monitor coverage of, and reporting on, Sri Lanka in the international media. **Sri Lanka Media Watch** evaluates this coverage against universally accepted journalistic standards of accuracy and impartiality and, where necessary, a right to reply.

Engage Sri Lanka was established to make the case for the United Kingdom engaging more closely with Sri Lanka. Britain has a close historical, cultural and economic relationship with Sri Lanka and it is important that we maintain and develop our connection with one of our oldest partners. In an age of economic uncertainty, British business should make the most of its reputation in Sri Lanka and expand its involvement in the Sri Lankan economy. Sri Lanka's commercial law is based on that of the United Kingdom and this is coupled with a skilled work force. Britain is already the second largest market after the United States for Sri Lankan exports. World Bank figures show that the Sri Lankan economy is growing by 8 percent a year. Sri Lanka is also a strategic partner for British business in South Asia and a key point of entry into the rapidly growing Indian market. Sri Lanka has the highest ranking in the World Bank's 'Ease of doing business' ratings in the region. The United Kingdom needs to engage as fully and vigorously as possible with Sri Lanka. British business already faces fierce competition from China and other countries. **Engage Sri Lanka** will seek to analyse and where necessary challenge any obstacles to our country's political and economic relationship with Colombo.

<www.engagesrilanka.com>

Copyright © Engage Sri Lanka 2012

Recounting the Lies: Frances Harrison, the LTTE and Sri Lanka

Frances Harrison's book, *Still Counting the Dead: Survivors of Sri Lanka's Hidden War*, is a telling insight into how the western commentocracy continues to distort accounts of the ending of the Sri Lankan civil war in 2009.¹ This war was a long and brutal conflict fought between the Government of Sri Lanka and a terrorist movement which called itself the "Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam" (LTTE, also known as the "Tamil Tigers"). The book will be welcomed by the *caffè latte* drinking, Channel 4-viewing, Hampstead set. Harrison will doubtless be gently back-slapped by her colleagues in the journalism and human rights industry, and will appear on numerous television and radio shows to discuss it.

Regrettably, in articulating this narrative, Harrison's book omits key facts, offers convenient half-truths and contains blatant falsehoods. The reality is that in doing so her book may well prolong any final resolution of the conflict by artificially sustaining a flimsy narrative that only serves the interests of members and fellow travellers of one of the world's most ruthless terrorist movements. The contents, claims and conclusions are so mired in propaganda as to be unusable to anyone looking for an objective and accurate account of the events at the end of the war.

The book comprises a series of interviews with ten Sri Lankan Tamils, all of whom, with one or two possible exceptions, are intimately linked with the LTTE. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the interviews dovetail with what can be termed the "Channel 4 Narrative", a version of events broadcast by Channel 4 television in 2011 and 2012. This projects an omnipresent Sri Lankan security state which established and then deliberately ignored civilian "no fire zones" in the last few months of the war, and in so doing killed thousands of Tamil civilians. This narrative, while conceding that the LTTE may have conscripted children to fight in its ranks, and may have shot at the occasional Tamil civilian, generally soft-peddles the atrocious nature of the LTTE, preferring to ignore the organisation's catalogue of war crimes and crimes against humanity.²

It is this human rights-*lite* approach by Harrison which provides a good introduction to the contradictions that mar her book. It is important to remind ourselves of what the LTTE was and how it behaved. In her acknowledgements in the book Harrison thanks Professor Daya Somasundaram, whom she describes as "Sri Lanka's leading expert on war trauma", for his valuable insights.³ Somasundaram described the control exercised by the LTTE within the areas it dominated in Sri Lanka: "[T]he LTTE maintained a fascist, totalitarian control over the civilian population with a network of prisons for dissidents and enemies who were killed or tortured and a strict pass system that did not allow people under their control to leave."⁴ The University Teachers for Human Rights (UTHR) echoed this analysis of the LTTE, similarly pointing to "its fascist structures and lines of control".⁵ (Another of Harrison's mentors, Gordon Weiss, himself the author of an anti-government tract, describes UTHR as an "independent" and "highly regarded civil society organisation"⁶). Walter Laqueur, the editor of the Penguin *Reader's Guide to Fascism*, a standard text on the subject, described the LTTE as "preaching a fanaticism and a ruthlessness that in Europe could be found only in the

¹ Frances Harrison, *Still Counting the Dead: Survivors of Sri Lanka's Hidden War*, Portobello Books, London, 2012.

² See, for example, "Sri Lanka's Killing Fields", Channel 4, London, 14 June 2011, available at <<http://www.channel4.com/programmes/sri-lankas-killing-fields/4od>>, and "Sri Lanka's Killing Fields: War Crimes Unpunished", Channel 4, London, 14 March 2012, available at <<http://www.channel4.com/programmes/sri-lankas-killing-fields/episode-guide/series-2/episode-1>>. For a detailed critique of the "Channel 4 Narrative", see *Appalling Journalism: Jon Snow and Channel 4 on Sri Lanka*, Engage Sri Lanka, November 2011, available at <<http://www.engagesrilanka.com/images/Appalling%20Journalism.pdf>>, and *Unprofessionalism Revisited. Channel 4 News, Sri Lanka and "Fernando"*, Engage Sri Lanka, London, December 2011, available at <<http://www.engagesrilanka.com/images/Unprofessionalism%20revisited.pdf>>. See, for example, "Lies Agreed Upon", Ministry of Defence, Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, Colombo, available at "Lies Agreed Upon: Sri Lanka counters Channel 4 (Full Video)", Uploaded by gihangamos on 1 August 2011 available at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5O1JAfRXew>>.

³ *Still Counting the Dead*, *op. cit.*, xi.

⁴ Daya Somasundaram, "Collective trauma in the Vanni – a qualitative inquiry into the mental health of the internally displaced due to the civil war in Sri Lanka", *International Journal of Mental Health Systems*, 4:22, 2010, available at <<http://www.ijmhs.com/content/4/1/22>>. Professor Somasundaram is a consultant psychiatrist at Glenside Hospital, and Clinical Associate Professor at the University of Adelaide, Australia. His research and publications have mainly concentrated on the psychological effects and treatment of disasters including the long-term effects on communities. He is a Fellow of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. He was also a Senior Professor of Psychiatry at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Jaffna and Consultant Psychiatrist working in Northern Sri Lanka for over a decade.

⁵ "The Plight of Child Conscripts, Social Degradation & Anti-Muslim Frenzy", Special Report No. 14, University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), 20 July 2002, p. 27.

⁶ See Gordon Weiss, *The Cage: The Fight for Sri Lanka and the Last Days of the Tamil Tigers*, The Bodley Head, London, 2011, p. 69 and note 10, p. 297.

fascist movements of the 1930s.”⁷ The *Economist* described the LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran simply as “a textbook fascist”.⁸ This inconvenient reality is missing from Harrison’s book.

Similarly, Harrison barely mentions the fact that the LTTE was one of the world’s most deadly terrorist groups. She devotes one sentence to this fact. The LTTE was not just a terrorist organisation because the Government of Sri Lanka called them terrorists as a whim or part of a domestic propaganda attempt to discredit the organisation. Thirty-two countries, most of them western, listed the LTTE as a terrorist organisation. The United States designated the LTTE as a “Foreign Terrorist Organization” in October 1997, and subsequently named it as a “Specially Designated Global Terrorist movement”. The US Federal Bureau of Investigation described the LTTE as “among the most dangerous and deadly extremists in the world”.⁹ The European Union, generally a fence-sitter in most things, listed the LTTE as a terrorist organisation on 17 May 2006. In 2006, the United Kingdom listed the LTTE as a proscribed terrorist group under the 2000 Terrorism Act, putting it on a par with al-Qaeda.¹⁰ Canada also listed the LTTE as a terrorist group in 2006. India listed the LTTE as a terrorist organisation as early as 1992. Harrison and her interviewees also ignore the inconvenient fact that the LTTE organisation is intimately involved with other organised crimes such as gangland murders, drug trafficking, people smuggling, credit card fraud, identity theft, money laundering, gunrunning and piracy at sea.

Weiss fleshes out the LTTE’s “record of appalling violence”.¹¹ He records that the LTTE chief Prabhakaran gave orders “to bomb buses full of women and children...murder monks and kill prisoners”¹², and that “[t]hey hacked, bludgeoned, shot, burned and hanged civilians in a long series of massacres...Children were slaughtered alongside the elderly in dozens of small-scale incidents.”¹³ Many of these murders were racist in nature and part of the LTTE’s policy of systematic ethnic cleansing. The LTTE “planted bombs on trains, aircraft and buses...In 1987, a car bomb exploded in Colombo’s Pettah, killing 113 civilians. In 1996, four briefcase bombs exploded simultaneously on a train, killing sixty-four passengers and wounding more than 400 others. In 2006, a roadside blast killed sixty civilians on a bus in Kebithigollewa.”¹⁴ Weiss also points out that between 1983 and May 2009: “there were around 200 individual Tiger attacks on civilian targets, in which between 3,700 and 4,100 civilians were killed.”¹⁵ Weiss also notes that “This figure does not include the number of Tamils allegedly killed by the Tigers in the areas they controlled, nor the many hundreds of prisoners thought to have been killed in Tamil Tiger gulags. The University Teachers for Human Rights estimates that the latter figure is as high as 7,000.”¹⁶ Weiss also confirms that the LTTE “systematised the use of suicide bombers...and child soldiers.”¹⁷ And, in the last months of the war, the LTTE forcibly displaced hundreds of thousands of civilians, incarcerating them in what would become a vast, mobile, open air concentration camp, shooting or beating to death any of its inmates that tried to escape. The LTTE, and its members military and political, were intimately associated with war crimes and crimes against humanity.

This leads us to one of the glaring contradictions in Harrison’s book. Her disconnection from the reality of the LTTE and its members’ collective responsibility for crimes against humanity is all too apparent. While Harrison is superficially exercised by war crimes, impunity and accountability, she appears to wish to be allowed to pick and choose her war criminals and war crimes. Harrison, for example, willingly meets with and tries to assist a former LTTE combatant who managed to leave Sri Lanka after the war and was in London seeking asylum. She had previously met him when she visited LTTE-controlled areas in Sri Lanka after the 2004 tsunami. She calls him “Bala, though it’s not his real name.”¹⁸ She states: “To many he was just a terrorist, but he was also a human being who paid an enormous price for his political choices. Most of his colleagues are dead: only a few made it abroad, missing limbs and/or deeply traumatised.”¹⁹

Harrison’s take is unbelievably selective and self-serving. She is talking about a man she knew to have been an active member of the LTTE, a group described by her friend Professor Somasundaram as a “fascist, totalitarian” organisation and compared by western experts to the Nazi party in Germany. To extend Professor Somasundaram’s and Laqueur’s

⁷ Walter Laqueur, *The New Terrorism*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2001, p. 195.

⁸ “What the president’s re-election means for his sorely divided country”, *The Economist*, 28 January 2010, available at <<http://www.economist.com/node/15393468>>.

⁹ “Taming the Tamil Tigers”, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Department of Justice, Washington-DC, 2008, available at http://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2008/january/tamil_tigers011008.

¹⁰ See, *Blackstone’s Counter-Terrorism Handbook*, Oxford University Press, 2009.

¹¹ Weiss, *op. cit.*, xxiv.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 80-81. The Pettah is an open air market area in Colombo.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, xxii.

¹⁸ *Still Counting the Dead*, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

fascist analogy a little further, would she have done the same for a member of the equally fascist and murderous German SS who had fled abroad after the Second World War? Would she write about the “enormous price” he had paid for his “political choices”? What she chooses not to address are the thousands of innocent civilians who also paid an enormous price for Bala’s political choices, and his membership of and service within an organisation guilty of systematic crimes against humanity, something for which he bears collective responsibility. He would have been party to the forced dislocation of hundreds of thousands of Tamil civilians into what amounted to a mobile concentration camp in the war zone, thousands of whom were shot or beaten to death by the organisation of which he was a member, an organisation also responsible for the deaths of thousands of children used by the LTTE as cannon fodder (something in which the SS also specialised). To use the Nazi/SS analogy, it would be as if Harrison was saying that a former Nazi fighter and concentration camp guard deserved sympathy because “he was also a human being who paid an enormous price for his political choices”, and because “most of his colleagues are dead”, and that only a few of his colleagues had “made it abroad, missing limbs and/or deeply traumatised”, (presumably in this analogy to Paraguay or Argentina). Harrison, in this analogy, would be asking us to focus more on the “enormous price” the SS member had paid and not the enormous price Jews and others had had to pay as the result of his “political choices”. Hers is an obscene position to take.



One of the LTTE’s many crimes against humanity, the use of child soldiers

Harrison’s book is useful in that it demonstrates that western immigration controls are self-evidently deficient. It provides clear evidence that European Union countries, including the United Kingdom, have allowed fully-trained terrorists and bomb-makers into their countries, despite the fact they had been members of an internationally proscribed terrorist organisation guilty of crimes against humanity. It is surprising to learn that so many of Harrison’s interviewees have sought asylum and settled in Britain and Europe. There is a good chance that they are doing so illegally. Canada, for example, does not grant residency to LTTE members (or former SS members) on the grounds that they have participated in crimes against humanity. It is worth noting that in 2011 a Sri Lankan who claimed that he had worked as a tax collector in the LTTE’s finance department from 1992-95 was found to have been a “war criminal” by a Canadian court and ordered out of the country. He had arrived in Canada in 2007 on a fake Canadian passport, settled in Montreal and claimed refugee protection (as have most of Harrison’s interviewees in European states). The *National Post* reported: “That claim was rejected by the Immigration & Refugee Board (IRB) after an adjudicator found reasonable grounds to believe he committed a war crime or crime against humanity under Article 1F of the United Nations’ convention on refugees.” A Canadian judge stated: “The applicant admitted that the Tigers participated in many crimes against humanity and that they are an organization directed to a limited, brutal purpose...The [Immigration & Refugee Board] panel found the Tigers committed crimes against humanity at the time

when the applicant belonged to it; that is, between 1992 and 1995...The panel also found the applicant was complicit in crimes committed by the Tigers.”²⁰ It has to be borne in mind that Canada has a reputation for fairness. By the Canadian government’s legal definition, half and probably more of Harrison’s interviewees are clearly war criminals, a fact she does not raise let alone address.

Harrison’s relationship with the LTTE is far too close for anything remotely objective to emerge from the book. “Bala” aside, she also has a very cosy relationship with the senior LTTE leader Seevaratnam Pulidevan (she prefers to call him by his nickname, “Puli”). She admits to buying specially autographed books for him (Daniel Goleman’s book *Emotional Intelligence* for example). Would she have gone out of her way to buy autographed books for his 1940s equivalent Joseph Goebbels? Amazingly, Harrison is even drawn into serving the LTTE’s desperate need for an international intervention to save the organisation. She writes that “the rebels prolonged the end by keeping hundreds of thousands of women and children trapped with them. They hoped for a humanitarian intervention. [Seevaratnam Pulidevan] had been quite open about this approach. He told European friends that...if enough civilians died in Sri Lanka the world would be forced to step in. It was callous brinkmanship, played with innocent lives.”²¹ The LTTE itself ensured that thousands of civilians died. It was, however, callous brinkmanship in which Harrison wittingly or unwittingly played her part. She reveals that she “lobbied the Church of England to take a moral position on the war, thinking the Archbishop of Canterbury could raise awareness about more than 300,000 Tamil civilians trapped in the battlefield...Puli was supposed to talk to them but...he vanished offline.” Would she as willingly have tried to arrange for Goebbels to speak to the Pope in an effort to prevent the Russians’ final push into Berlin in April 1945?

Not one to let the issue go, Harrison goes on to complain that “even commemorations for the dead have been banned from taking place lest they become opportunities for espousing nationalism.”²² What she does not add is that these commemorations are for LTTE dead and the LTTE’s dead leadership. Sixty years after the end of the Second War, the commemoration of Nazi leaders, war criminals or “martyrs” is still illegal in Germany – and many other European countries – because of the dangers of enflaming the same sort of fascist nationalism that has characterised the LTTE.

Any account of the Sri Lankan civil war, however brief, should be prefaced with a warning about the central role that propaganda played within the conflict – and self-evidently continues to play post-war. In addition to the virtually insurmountable difficulties in ascertaining simple facts about what happened in the last few weeks and months of the conflict, it is also clear that claims about what happened are permeated now as then with ruthless propaganda, disinformation and deception. This external LTTE and pro-LTTE propaganda machine has continued to exist after the total defeat of the organisation inside Sri Lanka in May 2009. The LTTE had been able to generate an annual income believed to have been between US\$200-300 million during the conflict.²³ To preserve its *raison d’être* and maintain its lucrative multi-million dollar funding base within the diaspora therefore, the external LTTE has a vested interest in keeping the propaganda war against the government alive. And this is precisely what they have done in the months and years since the end of the war. The LTTE’s continuing propaganda war is part and parcel of a process of making money from the Tamil diaspora. They have systematically targeted western newspapers, television and radio stations and journalists with pre-packaged “exclusives” alleging sensationalist abuses of human rights. Harrison’s book is important because it provides clear evidence that although militarily defeated, the LTTE’s sophisticated propaganda machinery is still functional. This propaganda machine has a reputation for efficiency. A western intelligence service has noted that “[t]he LTTE international propaganda war is conducted at an extremely sophisticated level.”²⁴ Harrison’s friend Weiss noted that the LTTE have “[a]n efficient propaganda and political operation...in dozens of countries amongst the million-strong Tamil diaspora”.²⁵ The *Economist* certainly was very aware of the LTTE’s propaganda expertise, noting the LTTE’s “skill at manipulating foreign opinion”.²⁶

It has to be said that with Harrison the LTTE was in any instance pushing at an open door. Harrison was clearly unable to offset, or was simply unaware of, the dangers posed by this formidable propaganda machine. Neither bodes well for someone working as a journalist and human rights activist. She accepted at face value narratives from people she does not know and is unable to identify (she says because she does not know their real names), several of whom are *de jure* war criminals. The kindest thing that can be said about her is that she was clearly out of her depth and has been led by

²⁰ See, “Ex-Tiger tax collector called war criminal”, *National Post*, 29 September 2011, available at <<http://news.nationalpost.com/2011/09/29/ex-tiger-tax-collector-called-war-criminal>>.

²¹ *Still Counting the Dead*, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-63.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 228.

²³ John Solomon and B. C. Tan, “Feeding the Tiger: How Sri Lankan insurgents fund their war”, *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, 1 August 2007, available at <<http://www.c-cft.org/publication/pdf/FeedingtheTiger.pdf>>.

²⁴ *Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam’s (LTTE) International Organization and Operations – A Preliminary Analysis*, Commentary No. 77, Canadian Security Intelligence Service, Ottawa, 1999, available at <<http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/com77e.htm>>.

²⁵ Weiss, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

²⁶ “Dark victory”, *The Economist*, 23 April 2009, available at <<http://www.economist.com/node/13527366>>.

the nose by some very sophisticated propagandists. “Uma”, Harrison’s “teacher” interviewee, provides an example of this contrived propaganda – she is able to cite a character in Leon Uris’ book *Exodus*: “Fighting back is called terrorism but he is the sole survivor – his whole family is wiped out. In a way he is like me.”²⁷ Another of her interviewees, “Usha”, presents as an equally skilled propagandist and is also well prepared for appearing in a book published in Britain. She compares her story with that of the *Great Escape*, the epic British World War Two escape film. Harrison inadvertently confirms this manipulation, noting: “The first time we met, she compared the end of the war to an Xbox video game, with gratuitous shooting and explosions. It was a simile purely for my benefit because nobody had Xboxes in northern Sri Lanka.”²⁸ “Usha” ends her carefully calculated interview with Harrison with a perfectly crafted reference to social media. Harrison asked if there was anything she wanted to add: “[Usha] started talking about the worldwide uproar over a woman who was caught on film putting her neighbour’s pet cat inside a rubbish bin. The video had gone viral on the Internet. ‘Human beings have been slaughtered in the thousands in Sri Lanka,’ she said, ‘and nothing has happened at all, nothing.’” Usha was then said to have broken down in tears. Usha’s crocodile tears are selectively deployed. As Harrison has to admit, Usha denied LTTE responsibility for any human rights abuses: she cares not a jot about, nor sheds a tear for, the tens of thousands of civilians murdered and maimed by the organisation of which she was an enthusiastic armed member. The *Economist* would have been hard pressed to present a better illustration of the LTTE’s “skill at manipulating foreign opinion”. In light of Harrison’s naïveté it should come as no surprise that the LTTE propagandist Lokeesan, someone she admits was “a journalist for a pro-rebel news site, Tamilnet”²⁹ and who also denies any LTTE wrongdoing whatsoever, provides her with the title for her book: “We’re still counting the dead.”³⁰ Wikipedia confirms that Reuters, Associated Press, BBC News, Agence France Presse, Xinhua and Al Jazeera English all refer to TamilNet as “the pro-LTTE website”.

As a consequence of being based essentially on a LTTE propaganda feed, Harrison’s book ignores inconvenient facts, not least of which being that the LTTE deliberately drew government fire into civilian areas, civilian populations and hospitals by purposefully shelling government forces both from “no-fire zones”, and from civilian concentrations themselves within and outside of “no-fire zones”; they established military positions within, and fired from, the vicinity of hospitals and temporary medical points; and they also deliberately shelled into civilians, civilian areas and hospitals in the areas they themselves controlled. Weiss noted: “[T]here is good evidence that...the Tamil Tigers fired artillery into their own people. The terrible calculation was that with enough dead Tamils, a toll would eventually be reached that would lead to international outrage and intervention.”³¹ He also confirmed that the LTTE shelled hospitals.³² He concludes: “Disturbingly, it became increasingly clear...that the Tamil Tigers were...*exercising a brand of ruthless terror on their own people that defies imagination*. As the combat area shrank and their desperation increased, their brutality increased exponentially. They would shoot, execute and beat to death many hundreds of people, ensure the deaths of thousands of teenagers by press-ganging them into the front lines, and kill those children and their parents who resisted.”³³ (Emphasis added.) Hardly any of this is mentioned, let alone admitted to, by Harrison’s ten interviewees, despite the fact that they would either have seen these war crimes and crimes against humanity being carried out by the LTTE on a daily basis, or were themselves party to them.

Propaganda half-truths

It is also noteworthy that Harrison and her interviewees present a picture of an omnipresent Sri Lankan security state that is avidly and vindictively pursuing LTTE terrorists and their supporters, so much so that she states she is unable to identify almost all of her interviewees. She notes that the government detained eleven thousand LTTE combatants (nearly all have now been released). She claims that “by the government’s own admission, some had very tenuous links to the Tigers.” She claims that one such man was detained for 435 days simply because he’d been forced to join the rebels for a brief spell fifteen years earlier.³⁴ Harrison may be unaware of the Canadian government’s legal ruling in this regard. Many of her “interviewees” claim to have been identified as LTTE combatants or associates, and mistreated or tortured because of that membership. Yet while ostensibly in custody they were able to use mobile telephones to contact friends and family abroad, receive huge amounts of money and in some cases were then miraculously able to leave the country, with Sri Lankan government-issued passports and visas from foreign embassies in their own names. All this despite the supposedly omnipresent state that is so much part and parcel of the “Channel 4 Narrative”, allegedly itching to pounce on anyone with even a very tenuous link to the LTTE.

²⁷ *Still Counting the Dead, op. cit.*, p. 127.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

³¹ Weiss, *The Cage*, p. 109.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 141-42.

³⁴ *Still Counting the Dead, op. cit.*, p. 232.

Blatant Falsehoods: The Lying Nun

In addition to half-truths and omissions, Harrison's book also contains outright falsehoods. It is ironic perhaps that even her interviewee "Sister Ignatius", a nun said to have been present in the war zone in the last months of the war, is caught out in a blatant lie. She claims to have been present in a church in the war zone which sheltered many young Tamils trying to avoid being illegally conscripted by the LTTE. She describes an incident in which an artillery shell hit the church and badly injured a Catholic priest, resulting in the loss of his leg. Harrison – and presumably the nun, given that it was her story in her chapter – state: "That shell explosion marked the start of a relentless onslaught by the army which was now within walking distance of the Tigers."³⁵ In keeping with the propaganda claim made by the nun and echoed by Harrison, TamilNet claimed at the time that "Sri Lanka Army" artillery fired at the church, injuring "Rev Father James Pathinathar, a prominent Catholic priest".³⁶ The following day, TamilNet reported that "Sri Lanka Army" shells had hit the church two days running, killing 14 civilians.³⁷ TamilNet claimed that "The SLA has attacked the church despite repeated calls from Jaffna Diocese not to target the church where 17 priests and 22 nuns were continuing to serve their congregations." Unfortunately for Sister Ignatius' credibility, and that of Harrison's book, this incident, the shelling of Our Lady of Roses Roman Catholic Church in Valaignarmadam, is well-documented and the truth was very different. The anti-government University Teachers for Human Rights organisation independently documented the attack on this church:

[A] single shell fell in the church and Fr. James Pathinathar was injured...After the last incident of shelling, a senior educationist who was a few hundred yards south of the church, told us that based on what the people gathered of the shell's origin and trajectory, the general consensus was that the LTTE fired it. Another shell which fell the next day, led to the amputation of one of Fr. Vasanthaseelan's legs. He and Fr. Pathinathar were subsequently removed by ICRC ship. Fr. Pathi is credited by several persons who were in the NFZ of having tried to protect would-be-conscripts.³⁸

The Valaignarmadam incident was also reported by the US government which confirmed that the LTTE shelled the church: "A shell hit the roof of a small church packed with people...The witness sustained shrapnel wounds in his back. He believed the attack was committed by the LTTE".³⁹ The clergy in the church had infuriated the LTTE by providing sanctuary for young Tamils seeking to avoid being used as forced conscripts by the LTTE. UTHR was also in a position to provide an essential background to the LTTE artillery attack at Valaignarmadam, something fleetingly touched upon but not explained by Sister Ignatius:

Illamparthy and Elilan of the LTTE's political wing had several times called on the church fathers and asked for permission to go into the church and take the runaways and those evading conscription. The fathers refused...Finally, Illamparthy, Elilan and Malaimakal, a senior woman cadre, came...and gave notice to the fathers that whether they allow it or not, they are coming to take what they regarded as their property [the would be conscripts]. Finally...a large number of LTTE cadres, including police and military, surrounded the church in the style of a military operation. They barged in. They went into the church with their guns, but the victims evidently did not want to give up without a fight. The LTTE opened fire and killed four persons inside the church. As panic and terror spread the church emptied. The LTTE brought a stream of buses, packed the young and moved them away in quick succession to Mullivaykkal...The people were at boiling point. By then the LTTE was conscripting randomly...The people gathered at the church, began shouting at the LTTE and threw stones at them. The LTTE police was called in to clear the environs of the church of irate civilians by firing into the air and manning a barricade.⁴⁰

The UTHR noted that the LTTE subsequently returned after 20 April:

Illamparthy and Elilan once more came to the church and wanted the fathers to move to Mullivaykkal. The fathers refused. There was at this juncture nothing but mutual aversion between them and the LTTE. On an earlier occasion the fathers had wanted the LTTE to surrender in order to spare the civilians the enormous suffering imposed on them. The LTTE had become very angry.⁴¹

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106.

³⁶ "SLA shells Church in Valaignarmadam, Fr. James Pathinathar wounded", TamilNet, 22 April 2009, available at <<http://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=29125>>.

³⁷ "SLA shelling on church kills 14, Caritas-HUDEC Vanni director wounded", TamilNet, 23 April 2009, available at <<http://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=29135>>.

³⁸ "Let Them Speak: Part III At Sea in 'Mattalan: Escape invites Death and Staying is Worse", University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), Sri Lanka, Special Report No. 34, 13 December 2009.

³⁹ *Report to Congress on Incidents During the Recent Conflict in Sri Lanka*, United States Government, Washington-DC, 2009, available at <<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/131025.pdf>>.

⁴⁰ "Let Them Speak: Part III At Sea in 'Mattalan: Escape invites Death and Staying is Worse", *op. cit.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

A day later the LTTE deliberately shelled the church, killing a dozen civilians and injuring the priests. It was clearly not the army that shelled the church but the enraged LTTE, who were “very angry” with the priests. The attack destroyed a place of refuge for would-be child soldier conscripts. This incident provides a clear-cut example of the unreliability of the Harrison book, and the claims made within it – even claims made by a nun with no ostensible link to the LTTE.

The Interviewees

Such deception on the part of one of Harrison’s interviewees should not have been unexpected. Even a cursory assessment of the interviewees, their claims and reliability should have rung alarm bells with Harrison’s editors and publishers. The interviewees are referred to as the journalist, the spokesman, the doctor, the nun, the teacher, the rebel mother, the volunteer, the fighter, the shopkeeper, the wife. Seven of the ten interviewed have very clear affiliations with the LTTE, most of them as active members. Another can be shown to be unreliable or simply lying in key claims. Unsurprisingly, they all stick doggedly to the “Channel 4 Narrative”. The “journalist”, “Lokeesan”, an unashamed LTTE propagandist, disputes amongst other things any forced LTTE displacement of civilians.⁴² The “spokesman”, Seevaratnam Pulidevan, the only one of the “interviewees” actually identified in the book, was described by Harrison as “the public face of the Tamil Tigers – the spokesman for one of the most successful and brutal ethnic insurgent groups in the world” to which “he was obedient, unquestioning, obliging and loyal”.⁴³ The “teacher”, “Uma”, is a former LTTE terrorist. The “rebel mother”, “Usha”, another former LTTE terrorist and the widow of another senior LTTE member, is a friend of “Uma” the “teacher”, and is perhaps the most skilled propagandist of the interviewees. Even Harrison notices that she was providing similes “purely for my benefit”.⁴⁴ Unsurprisingly, “Usha” had also served in the LTTE’s propaganda wing. The “fighter”, “Neriyen”, is a self-confessed LTTE bomb-maker who, as Harrison records, claims “implausibly that the Tigers never shot at civilians to prevent them escaping. Instead he says it was pro-government Tamil paramilitaries who infiltrated the rebel forces in order to discredit them.”⁴⁵ He also tries to distance himself from the well-documented fact that the LTTE used child soldiers. The wife, “Manimolly”, a “young Tamil housewife”, is married to a husband with “secrets”. He is from a LTTE family whose brothers and sisters were LTTE members. He is himself accused of involvement in setting off bombs. The authorities show her a picture of her husband in LTTE uniform. She admits lying to the police and claims to have been detained and raped. Despite all this, a matter of months later she and her bomber husband are then miraculously allowed to leave Sri Lanka for Britain on student visas. The “volunteer”, “Korben”, has a photo of the LTTE’s dead leader, Prabhakaran, on a wall in his house. He remains in a state of denial, refusing to accept that the LTTE ever shot dead any of the civilians attempting to flee LTTE control. Harrison states: “Korben...believed they just fired at the ground or above people’s heads rather than aiming to kill.”⁴⁶ The reality is that he was probably a LTTE member and is at the very least an enthusiastic supporter. “Niron”, the doctor, like most if not all of the doctors in LTTE areas, in government service or otherwise, was probably at least a nominal member of the LTTE. In any instance, he too unreservedly embraces the “Channel 4 Narrative”, and makes claims contradicted by other Tamil doctors present in the war zone. He provides a predictably inflated and easily disproved figure for civilian deaths, claiming that at least 27,000 people died in 2009.⁴⁷ The nun, “Sister Ignatius”, lies to Harrison about who shelled the church she was associated with and which critically injured her priests, claiming it was the government when independent sources show it to have been the LTTE.⁴⁸ The “shopkeeper”, “Karu”, is said to have been a “shopkeeper in the rebel areas of northern Sri Lanka.” While probably not a LTTE member, his is a rambling and implausible account of events possibly tailored for an asylum application. In short, Harrison merely serves as a stenographer for a carefully choreographed but deeply questionable version of events provided by people, most of them war criminals, with a vested ideological or selfish personal interest in making the claims they do.

The manipulation of Harrison is part of a discernible pattern. Interviewees very similar to those made available to Harrison were presented to other journalists as part of the LTTE’s post-2009 propaganda war. Channel 4 was in 2010 and 2011 presented with Vany Kumar, a young Anglo-Tamil woman who claimed to have been accidentally and innocently caught up in the conflict in 2009: Kumar was subsequently revealed to have been a fully-trained LTTE member.⁴⁹ Similarly, Meena Krishnamurthy, an Australian citizen of Sri Lankan Tamil descent, was presented in October 2011 to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s news channel as an innocent young woman who in 2004 “travelled to Sri Lanka to work in an orphanage”. She made a range of allegations against the Sri Lankan military.

⁴² *Still Counting the Dead*, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106.

⁴⁹ See, *Appalling Journalism: Jon Snow and Channel 4 on Sri Lanka*, *op. cit.*

Krishnamurthy, however, was subsequently also revealed to be a LTTE terrorist.⁵⁰ She received terrorist training in LTTE camps in LTTE-controlled parts of Sri Lanka, and was a member of the LTTE's Malathi women's unit, known by her *nom de guerre*, "Eelanadhi". Given her English language skills, and dual nationality, like Vany Kumar she was tasked to engage in international propaganda work. Ms Krishnamurthy, as a trained LTTE cadre married to another LTTE member, was present throughout the last months of the war. Interestingly, the "working in an orphanage" claim was a direct parallel to one of the interviewees presented to Harrison.

Harrison's book presents further questionable claims, this time by a Roman Catholic priest, about the alleged behaviour of Sri Lankan soldiers as they came across Tamil civilians on the battlefield at the end of the war. He claimed that "the soldiers were like animals, they were not normal. They wanted to kill everything. They looked as if they hadn't eaten or slept for days. They were crazed with blood lust. We are going to kill you. We have orders to shoot everyone."⁵¹ The first point that could be made is that even if that was the case, they self-evidently did not do so. The truth is once again very different. Weiss, no friend of the government, describes the behaviour of the Sri Lankan army towards the end of the war:

58th Division troops overran 20,000 civilians crouching in bunkers inside the No Fire Zone. Using loudspeakers as they inched forward through the jungles and across the rice paddy fields, troops summoned people towards their lines, despite the ferocious fighting and shelling all around...On the whole...the vast majority of people who escaped seem to have been received with relative restraint and care by the front-line SLA troops, who quickly passed them up the line for tea, rice and first aid.⁵²

Weiss went on to state:

It remains a credit to many of the front-line SLA soldiers that, despite odd cruel exceptions, they so often seem to have made the effort to draw civilians out from the morass of fighting ahead of them in an attempt to save lives. Soldiers yelled out to civilians, left gaps in their lines while they waved white flags to attract people forward and boldly plucked the wounded from foxholes and bunkers. Troops bravely waded into the lagoon under fire to rescue wounded people threading their way out of the battlefield or to help parents with their children, and gave their rations to civilians as they lay in fields, exhausted in their first moments of safety after years of living under the roar and threat of gunfire.⁵³

Perhaps the most objective description of what happened in the no-fire zones, and the behaviour of the Sri Lankan army in the no-fire zones – in stark contrast to the picture presented by Harrison and her interviewees – are the first-hand accounts provided by University Teachers for Human Rights. They could not have been more clear:

In the context of the present war which took a heavy toll on the lives of soldiers, these ordinary men have shown remarkable restraint towards civilians when they come to contact with them. The civilians are uniformly scathing about the LTTE, and frequently found the Army helpful and considerate...It is hard to identify any other Army that would have endured the provocations of the LTTE, which was angling for genocide, and caused proportionately little harm.⁵⁴

University Teachers for Human Rights stated: "ground troops took care not to harm civilians."⁵⁵ Unfortunately for the credibility of Harrison's unnamed priest, UTHR also described the behaviour of the army in the very area and the very time the priest claimed to have been present: "Soldiers who entered the No Fire Zone on...the 9th and 15th May acted with considerable credit when they reached the proximity of civilians. They took risks to protect civilians and helped across the elderly who could not walk. Those who escaped have readily acknowledged this."⁵⁶

Harrison's book does serve a purpose for critics of the "Channel 4 Narrative" that has recently come to distort western perceptions of Sri Lankan affairs. Channel 4's 2011 documentary made much of a demonstration in Kilinochchi in September 2009 following the UN's decision to evacuate its staff from the town as the front-line moved north. Channel 4 dwelt on the demonstration in some depth, claiming that "news that the UN's international staff were leaving spread quickly and crowds of frightened Tamil civilians besieged the UN base." Channel 4 also spent considerable time showing footage of the demonstrators. Channel 4 interviewed a somewhat impressionable western UN official present at the demonstration: "They were really pleading with us as the UN, as the international

⁵⁰ See, for example, "Australian Based LTTE Network Exposed", Ministry of Defence, Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, Colombo, 4 November 2011, available at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QgD1Xrr4Z5Q>>.

⁵¹ *Still Counting the Dead*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

⁵² Weiss, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

⁵⁴ "A Marred Victory and a Defeat Pregnant with Foreboding", University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), Sri Lanka, Special Report No. 32, 10 June 2009, available at <http://www.uthr.org/SpecialReports/spreport32.htm#_ftn7>.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

community, please don't leave. I just remember it was a very vivid image of these tens of hands coming through the gate and pleading with us not to go, so I ran my camera along the line of people and there was one girl at the end...she wasn't shouting and she wasn't chanting she was still but she had just real sadness in her face. I was quite emotional at that point as well and her face just really captured this, have compassion, stay and watch." On cue, the UN official welled up with tears, declaring that "For me that was personally the worst moment of my life." He then went on to observe: "This Brahmin who has talking to me he just really just laid it on the line. We don't care about our shelter and food and water. We will take care of ourselves. We just need international eyes on the ground to see what's happening here." Channel 4 concludes with regard to the demonstration: "Those pleas fell on deaf ears at the UN." The demonstration was presented by Channel 4 as a spontaneous manifestation of Tamil civilian concern. It was covered in sentimental emotionalism. The reality could not have been more different.

Had they reported on a Gaddafi government-orchestrated demonstration in Libya, or a pro-Nazi demonstration in Germany, Channel 4 News – and most if not all other western media channels – would have made it very clear that the demonstration had not been spontaneous but had in fact been premeditated. In the Killinochi instance Channel 4 reported the demonstration as spontaneous. It was either unaware of the fact that it was stage-managed or it chose not to mention it. Either way, it reflects badly on Channel 4's professionalism. Harrison provides independent evidence that Channel 4 was taken in. She describes the same event covered by Channel 4: "Tamil women in faded frocks and flip-flops and worn-out men in blue and white checked sarongs had suddenly appeared outside the UN compound, blocking the way." She states that a UN worker "saw first scores of disembodied brown hands poking through a gap three-quarters of the way up the big, white metal gate. 'Don't go!' they shouted, holding up home-made cardboard placards on which they'd written the same message in English, for the benefit of the foreigners...There were many familiar faces in the crowd that sat on the road to prevent the UN lorries driving out. Mrs Javan, whose husband ran the rebel radio station, was there that day. 'We begged them not to leave,' she recalled. 'We feared we would all be killed.'"

Harrison, however, reveals that it was "obvious the rebels had instigated the demonstration to force the UN to postpone its departure. The reason soon became clear..." She states that that evening "a long line of rebel artillery guns and armoured vehicles thundered out of town. It was a tactical withdrawal, using the UN presence as cover. The Tigers were pulling out all their heavy weaponry; when they'd finished, the protests outside the UN office stopped as if by magic and the aid workers were free to go...the rebels wouldn't think twice about using UN personnel as a human shield."⁵⁷ What Harrison is oblivious to is that latter-day LTTE propagandists have manipulated her in precisely the way they played the UN and western media in Killinochi.

Methodology, what methodology?

Bearing in mind the gravity of the claims made and discussed in her book, war crimes and crimes against humanity, Harrison's methodology, or more accurately the lack of it, is appalling for several reasons. Her research is poor. She appears, for example, to be unaware of the single most relevant resource dealing with the issues she purports to address. She does not once mention the University Teachers for Human Rights, despite the fact that it is the only independent human rights organisation in Sri Lanka with a huge body of first-hand work, much of it dealing with the end of the war and is divorced from LTTE propaganda – unlike her interviewees. She presents as "witnesses" to the events of 2009 ten people who – with one exception – she did not know and of whose real identities she was actually unaware. This is stunningly unprofessional. If that is not bad enough, these were not people as it were off the street. Seven of the ten people she interviewed were either LTTE terrorists or avid supporters – to the extent of denying any wrongdoing whatsoever on the part of the LTTE. Two of the others made questionable claims or were caught in outright lies. Following on from this, Harrison's stated interest in, and commitment to, human rights is undermined by the fact that at least five and possible two more of her ten interviewees would be war criminals according to the Canadian government's interpretation of Article 1F of the United Nations' Convention on Refugees. She is either unaware of this fact or has chosen to ignore it. Harrison also fails to address the fact that the LTTE and its remaining international adherents are sophisticated propagandists.

Counting the Dead?

There is a central methodological failing in Harrison's book. While ostensibly setting out to address the issue of how many people may have died in the last months of the Sri Lankan conflict, she avoids addressing the issue in any objectively scientific or forensic way. The only broadly accurate statement she makes is that "it's known that between 282,380 and 289,915 Tamils were counted at the end of the war." From then on she engages in subjective and self-serving, some might say voodoo, mathematics. The mortality figure at the heart of what happened in 2009, and the subject of *Still Counting the Dead: Survivors of Sri Lanka's Hidden War*, is mired in claim and counter-claim.

⁵⁷ *Still Counting the Dead, op. cit.*, pp. 15-16.

Harrison makes the amazing claim that the war left “anywhere from 26,000 to 146,679 people unaccounted for, presumed dead.”⁵⁸ The UN’s carefully researched work at the time established a total figure of 7,721 killed and 18,479 wounded, and a recently released Sri Lankan government post-war census report recorded that about 7,400 people died of undefined or “other” causes during the months leading up to the end of the war.⁵⁹

Given the overarching controversy over these figures, it is very surprising that Harrison ignores an objective, scientific and forensic way of ascertaining mortality in war situations. In 1999 Robin M Coupland and David R Meddings, a surgeon and epidemiologist respectively, published a landmark study in the *British Medical Journal* which examined the ratio between those killed and injured in armed conflict since 1940. The study concluded that “During the fighting of war the number of people wounded is at least twice the number killed and may be 13 times as high.”⁶⁰ Tirman writes of “a plausible 5:1 ratio of wounded to killed”.⁶¹ The implications of these ratios are very clear with regard to the war in Sri Lanka. Applying the Coupland-Meddings model to Harrison’s figure of 26,000 – 146,679 dead, then there should have been between 52,000 – 1,906,827 wounded civilians in the Vanni after the war (it should be noted that there were only 300,000 or so civilians in the Vanni to begin with). Weiss, however, records that “by late June, when all civilians were inside the [post-war IDP] camps, a collection of aid agencies had made a preliminary calculation of 15,000-20,000 wounded civilians”.⁶² This also clearly fits with UN figures. If one assumes a median figure of five in the Coupland-Meddings model, as suggested by Tirman, the number of wounded that would be associated with Harrison’s mortality claim would come to 130,000. If one lowers and inverts the dead-to-wounded ratio even using the more usual 1:3, and applies it to Weiss’ 15,000-20,000 figure for wounded civilians, it would point to a mortality figure of 5,000 – 6,666. This is very close both to the UN’s 7,721 figure before it was subjected to sustained propaganda and media sensationalism, and 7,400, the Sri Lankan government’s figure.

Conclusion

Rather than counting the dead, Frances Harrison’s book serves only to repackage stale propaganda, serving as an adjunct to the “Channel 4 Narrative”’s account of the end of the Sri Lankan civil war. This recounting is selective, distorts reality and refuses to acknowledge any positive aspects to the ending of Asia’s most vicious and longest-running civil war. Harrison clearly preferred to go for lazy and sensationalistic mortality figures, ignoring methodologically sound methods of deriving a more accurate, albeit less sexy figure – a figure which coincidentally correlates with the UN head counts and is additionally supported by statistical data. Regrettably, Harrison’s involvement with Sri Lanka follows in well-trodden footsteps. Professor Robert Oberst, a long-time observer of the Sri Lankan war, has clearly stated that the foreigners have artificially prolonged the conflict: “The interaction of the international community and the protagonists in Sri Lanka has resulted in increased warfare and a prolongation of the war.”⁶³ Harrison pontificates that there will be no real reconciliation until people agree what happened. What she is herself perpetuating, however, is a deeply questionable and provocative narrative shaped by old LTTE propaganda. She should perhaps have read more by groups such as University Teachers for Human Rights rather than flying all over the world ultimately to act as a stenographer for LTTE propaganda. It was another of the LTTE’s fascistic stable mates, Lenin, who coined the phrase “useful idiot”. Wikipedia defines the term: “In political jargon, *useful idiot* is a pejorative term used to describe people perceived as propagandists for a cause whose goals they do not understand, who are used cynically by the leaders of the cause.”⁶⁴ Harrison has been very useful to the LTTE. “Puli” would have been proud of her.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

⁵⁹ See, *Enumeration of Vital Events 2011*, Department of Census and Statistics, Ministry of Finance and Planning, Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, Colombo, 2011, and

“Sri Lanka government publishes war death toll statistics”, BBC News Article, 24 February 2012.

⁶⁰ Robin M. Coupland and David R Meddings, “Mortality associated with use of weapons in armed conflicts, wartime atrocities, and civilian mass shootings: literature review”, *British Medical Journal*, 319 (7207), 14 August 1999, pp. 407–410.

⁶¹ John Tirman, *The Deaths of Others: The Fate of Civilians in America’s Wars*, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 335. Tirman is the Executive Director and a Principal Research Scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Center for International Studies. Tirman is author, or co-author and editor, of twelve books on international affairs.

⁶² Weiss, *op. cit.*, p. 321.

⁶³ Robert C. Oberst, “The Impact of International Diffusion on the Escalation of the Sri Lankan Conflict”, in Steven Lobell and Phillip Mauceri (Editors), *Ethnic Conflict and International Politics: Explaining Diffusion and Escalation*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Oberst is Professor of Political Science at Nebraska Wesleyan University, and the author of many books and journal articles on Sri Lanka and South Asia.

⁶⁴ See, “Useful Idiot”, Wikipedia, available at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Useful_idiot>.