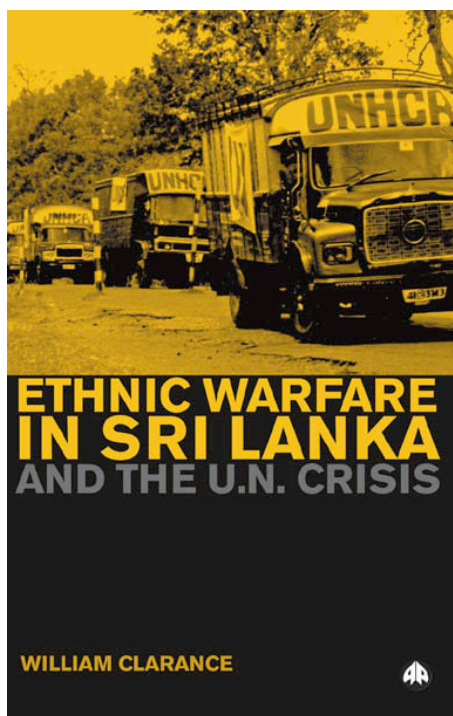


Review of “Ethnic Warfare in Sri Lanka and the UN Crisis” by William Clarence

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Speaking in early December 2006 to an assorted group of representatives from local and international humanitarian agencies in Colombo, I began my speech with the most virulent expletives imaginable. I then enquired as to why cuss-words are considered impolite, when we blithely utter words that describe a reality far more abhorrent - such as IDPs, refugees, conflict. The situation in Sri Lanka today is unfortunately one in which the full gamut of excuses and alibis, from national security to political correctness and caution, are run to evade the responsibility of basic human decency and rights protection. The employment of language that shocked, to illustrate the real obscenity that constitutes egregious human rights violations and violations of humanitarian standards in Sri Lanka and drew attention to the imperative of action in respect of preventing such abuses, was fortunately understood by those present.

Accordingly, it is with great interest that I picked up a copy of “Ethnic Warfare in Sri Lanka and the UN Crisis” by William Clarence as a forthright text that looked at humanitarian concerns and the protection of civilians in Sri Lanka. The author was posted to Colombo in 1988 to head the UNHCR monitoring and reintegration programme for Tamil refugees repatriating from South India. Following the Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord 20 years ago in July 1987, the 3 years that ensued were supposed to usher peace, but resulted in the ignominious rout of the Indian Peacekeeping Forces (IPKF) in March 1990. The complex geo-political factors and actors that led to the breakdown of the Peace Accord, and the civilians caught up in the middle of the resulting spike in violence, forms the tableau upon which the author fleshes out UNHCR’s engagement with civilian protection. 275 pages of analysis, reminiscence, regret, innovation, diplomacy, spirited negotiations and frank prose serve, above all else, as a grim reminder of what is the inevitable outcome of violent conflict - civilian displacement in the form of refugees & IDPs, the loss of livelihoods, human security and life. The book is also a wonderful marker of how a few committed individuals can make a difference in even the most bureaucratic organisations, when the issue at stake is the urgent and sustained protection of ordinary civilians caught up in conflict.

While several leitmotifs run through this book, most notable is the author’s utter contempt for the US and its role in the UN. In the introduction to the book, dealing

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generally with the crises in the UN, the author firmly posits what he calls the short-sightedness and irresponsibility to the point of perversity of the US as a dominant factor in the loss of the UN's integrity in world affairs. The critique is almost a diatribe and seems to be the result of well-fermented frustrations with the US, not necessarily linked to the author's experiences in Sri Lanka. Understandably, for some within the UN, the current dispensation of the US is most distasteful, but it is equally important to recognise, as the author briefly does, its contribution to international ideals and the development of the UN itself. In a larger sense, however, the author makes a point that is somewhat lost in the ensuing pages that deal specifically with Sri Lanka, in that for the UN to continue as a force for good, it is imperative that it manages constructively the vexed engagements with US policy and its fall-out in various parts of the world, especially in a global order determined by the US led "War on Terror" after the terrorist attacks on US soil on 9th September 2001.

Quick to point out that the model of protection that was fashioned in Sri Lanka during 1987 - 1990 in particular would not work in other conflict zones, the author is cautiously optimistic that the innovations he spearheaded in Sri Lanka to deal with the rapidly changing ground conditions hold lessons for the protection of civilians in other conflicts. He makes the point, familiar to those within the UN, of the gross disconnect between field personnel and ground realities and the slow moving bureaucracy in Geneva. The author's model of protective neutral engagement - so called on account of the manner in which the UNHCR set up processes on the ground to help those fleeing from, caught in the middle of, or returning to zones of violent conflict - it is noted, was repeatedly denied necessary support from UNHCR's headquarters in Geneva, leading to desperate measures, as described in detail in the book, to ensure the continuation of processes on the ground to protect civilians. The effort expended to convince those far removed from ground realities, the author notes repeatedly, was indicative of serious structural flaws in the UNHCR, resulted in stifling the agency's mandate to protect civilians caught up in violent conflict, and at times even threatened to exacerbate the human tragedy by cutting off vital communications links between affected areas in the North and East of Sri Lanka and operations in Colombo.

It is fascinating to read the author's battles against those unfavourably disposed to the radical innovations he proposed for civilian protection in Sri Lanka and how, if this book is to be believed, the author facilitated a new paradigm of civilian protection within UNHCR by expanding its mandate to protect and look after those unable to escape hostilities, those displaced on account of it and those unable or unwilling to move from conflict zones. As the author notes, "the challenge for the UN is to develop an active protection role for civilians through its agency programmes in coordination with national governments and whenever possible without military involvement."

Speaking with great sensitivity to the repatriation of refugees under the 1987 Peace Accord, the author notes both the geo-political realities that governed the repatriation, the manner in which the UNHCR provided relief and security to returnees through a largely passive role, and the radical and swift change in civilian protection necessitated by the rise in violence after the IPKF's withdrawal in 1990. Key to the success of the UNHCR's operations at the time, the author notes, were two factors: a) deploying small teams of international staff who addressed pragmatically the

immediate humanitarian needs of the affected civilians populations, and b) their humanitarian neutrality, entirely without any form of military support or back-up, even of a technical or logistical nature.

In light of the violence directed against humanitarian aid workers, and the callous disregard for their vital support in conflict zones in support of civilians, 2006 was in particular an year in which much of the humanitarian innovation detailed in this book seemed irrelevant and grossly out-of-place. For instance, the author points repeatedly to the professionalism, under great duress, of the Sri Lanka Administrative Service (SLAS). Mr. Croos, a Senior Officer of the SLAS, is epitomized in the book as someone who, by mediating between the Army Commander in Talladi (Mannar), the LTTE political leader for the district and humanitarian agencies, provided a vital and indispensable role in settling “the inevitable small frictions which would have otherwise escalated dangerously in such a highly charged situation”. It is unclear whether speaking with terrorists in the current political dispensation, and especially in light of the new anti-terrorism regulations, will be looked upon as favourably today as it was during the author’s sojourn in Sri Lanka.

The innovative approaches to civilian protection form the backbone of this book, to which this review cannot do justice by mentioning in passing. However, the conceptual development and subsequent operation of open relief centres (in Madhu and Pesalai), food convoy’s led by international UNHCR staff without military escort in order to feed displaced persons in Madhu and the active protection role of the UNHCR at the source of the conflict, engaging with the dynamics that were triggering the IDP and refugee outflows (protective neutral engagement), gentleman’s agreements with the Army to ensure the protection of those in the open relief centres, the financial stringency of the operations (under US\$ 1.5 million), the deployment of a small but dedicated team (7 persons) and the strict neutrality of the UNHCR are those that are fascinating to read, ennobling to those still involved in civilian protection in the North and the East of Sri Lanka, and humbling when we recognise that the author, sometimes single-handedly and doggedly, pursued a vision within an often hostile UNHCR bureaucracy to alleviate the suffering of those on the ground in Sri Lanka facing violent conflict.

The book, however, is not without its own foibles. Foremost, this is not an easy book to read. The author, conditioned by decades of service within the UN, writes in a manner that is often turgid and highfalutin. Run on sentences that continue endlessly, complex arguments and counter-points juxtaposed with great difficulty in the same paragraph and the occasional needless tirade against an issue or actor devalue the insightful analysis and eminently valuable points buried in this book. Ideally, the book should have been edited by someone outside the UN system, thereby making it more accessible to those impatient with the slumberous writing (“The Best Intentions” by James Traub, is instructive in this regard as a book dealing with Kofi Annan’s second term in the UN and on various humanitarian crises in a prose eminently more elegant and readable than Clarence’s tome). There is also an element of naiveté at times, notably in the section dealing with the author’s encounter with the so-called “baby-brigade” of the LTTE. In perceiving that the patrol of child soldiers “came over as a very keen young team, lead by a seemingly less than brutal commander” (unlikely to be no more than 17 we are told) the author risks the gross oversimplification of a vexed issue that bedevils Sri Lanka to this date - the use of

children in armed conflict as combatants in the LTTE or as recently alleged, in the Karuna faction aided and abetted by the Sri Lankan Army. I also missed the contributions of local staff in the UNHCR offices in Colombo and in the Open Relief Centres. While much is said of the author's interactions and quiet diplomacy with State officials, the LTTE and the armed forces, I missed reading what must surely have the vital back-office and field support of equally dedicated Sri Lankan staff, those who inherited the structures and processes the author set in motion and had to deal with the fall out of increased violence on the ground long after the author left Sri Lanka. Furthermore, in its narrative structure, the book meanders cryptically between analysis, anecdote, personal vignette, diary entries, flashbacks and socio-political critique - giving it a rather chaotic nature with frequent shifts in narration and style. Lending it more topical relevance would have been a section, perhaps incorporated into the final or penultimate sections of the book, of the author's reflection of humanitarian perspectives and civilian protection in contemporary Sri Lanka. We see the first strains of active targeting of humanitarian activities in the attacks against the MSF as noted in the book, but today, the severe curtailment of access and activities of humanitarian organisations brings into question the role and relevance of agencies such as the UNHCR in Sri Lanka. As the author presciently notes at the beginning of the book:

“Once conflicts sink to... anarchic levels of contempt for human life and dignity, the scope for an international agency team to play an active protection role without some form of military back-up, if not altogether excluded, is drastically reduced to the point where its benefit is questionable. Put another way, an agency's role has to be closely and constructively engaged with the daily reality of humanitarian needs in a conflict in order to make a worthwhile difference: a mere passive observer role.... is of doubtful value...” (Page 8)

One can argue that the situation today in Sri Lanka is one in which humanitarian values are, at best, of secondary concern to the actors engaged in the conflict. Regrettably, we seem destined to repeat the mistakes of the past. The author's sombre reflections, amongst other issues, on the continued challenges facing the UNHCR in dealing with IDPs and civilians trapped in violent conflict, are vital considerations to bear in mind when advocating, as is the fashion these days, a Hobbesian war to end terrorism in Sri Lanka.

In sum, this is a timely and vital book that notwithstanding its murky prose, is an essential read for those engaged in humanitarian protection, conflict transformation and peace-building, in Sri Lanka, and around the world.