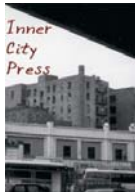


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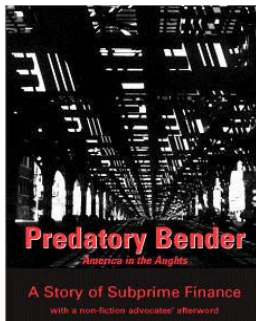
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In Sri Lanka, UN Has Casualty Estimate But Won't Release, Why No Cease Fire Call Is "Theoretical Question," Ban's Office Says

Byline: Matthew Russell Lee of Inner City Press at the UN: *News Analysis*

UNITED NATIONS, February 17 -- With civilians dying daily in the [conflict between the government of Sri Lanka](#) and the Tamil Tiger militia, on Tuesday Inner City Press asked Ban Ki-moon's spokesperson Michele Montas for the UN's estimate of civilian deaths, and whether it is higher or lower than the 1200 figure used in the Gaza conflict earlier this year. Ms Montas replied that "we are trying to save people, not count bodies." Video [here](#), from Minute 22:48.

But Inner City Press, as well as at least one other correspondent at Tuesday UN noon briefing, have been informed of an informal UN estimate of civilian death, higher than that in Gaza. Ms. Montas was asked, and denied, that the withholding of the UN estimate is politically motivated. Inner City Press reiterated the yes or no question, is the estimate higher or lower than the figure that UN used in Gaza. "I cannot tell you," Ms. Montas said. "I have to go back and see. We have no observers." Video [here](#), from Minute 26:40.

Inner City Press has asked for confirmation that Sri Lanka's president has invited Ban for a visit, and asked if that meant to the whole country including the Vanni region, or only to a portion. Ms. Montas confirmed the invitation, but said that no decision has been made. Watch this site.

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The death and destruction a child observes, the UN cannot or will not

Ms. Montas had read out a statement that the UN calls on the Tamil Tigers and the government to "refrain from fighting in areas of civilian concentration." Inner City Press inquired into the phrasing, different that the cease fire calls issued by Ban Ki-moon regarding Gaza, the Congo and other recent conflicts. Ms. Montas called it a "theoretical question." But when Inner City Press last week asked Ban Ki-moon directly if he was calling for a cease fire in Sri Lanka and if not, why not, [Ban answered that he couldn't, because Sri Lanka is not on the Security Council's agenda.](#)

This is ironic, because in 2007 -- before being told by Sri Lanka's president and his senior advisor that the end of the Tamil Tigers is near, if the UN will just look the other way for a time -- Ban Ki-moon did call for a cease fire in Sri Lanka, which wasn't then on the Security Council's agenda either. Even Ban's office backpeddled on February 13, acknowledging that he has the power to call for a cease fire. *But not the will?*

From the [transcript of the February 17, 2009 UN noon briefing](#) -

Inner City Press: There are reports from Sri Lanka today that the President has said that he has invited Ban Ki-moon to visit the country. I wanted to know if you are aware of that invitation and if it includes the whole country or only parts of the country. And then also, does the UN system have any estimate of the number of civilian casualties caused by either side since this most recent upsurge in conflict has begun in Sri Lanka? Some say it's well over a thousand or larger than it was in Gaza. What is the number...?

Spokesperson: We don't have an exact count. As you know, we have some people from the UN -- I just read a note on this -- who are themselves trapped in that area where the civilians are trapped. We don't have an overall evaluation; we have no way of knowing what the exact count is.

Inner City Press: Is that something that the UN is trying to do? I mean, at what point, I guess what level of casualties would...?

Spokesperson: We're trying to save people.

Question: Exactly.

Spokesperson: Right now, what we're trying to do most is not counting bodies; it's trying to save the living. Right now, we have been calling for civilians to be allowed to leave the area of fighting. We have been asking that they be able to do so without being harmed in any war and we have denounced the fact that some of them were shot at and killed.

Inner City Press: I heard the statement that you said; and you said that the Secretary-General or the UN calls for them to refrain from fighting in areas of civilian concentration. Is that a call for a ceasefire and if not, why not, given the level of civilian casualties in this area?

Spokesperson: We have been asking for the hostilities to stop...

Inner City Press: In all areas? Not just in the areas that those people come out of...I'm sorry to belabour the point...

Spokesperson: Our concern is about the civilian areas. Our concern is that these people be allowed to leave the area; including our own people who are also trapped with the civilian population in there. And you know they went in there to help. They were carrying food and all the essentials to the Vanni area where civilians are. So, to us what is foremost is civilian lives. Whether you want to call it a ceasefire or not, it seems to me it's a theoretical question.

Inner City Press: There has been a lot coverage saying that actually over the weekend the UN statement became decidedly...obviously the LTTE has done a lot of bad things, but all the statements have been about ... UNICEF said that they were recruiting child soldiers, the UN said that they're firing; there didn't seem to be any commentary on the Government's actions. So, I guess I just want to say that the tenor, some are saying...

Spokesperson: Well, this is what we get from ground, from people on the ground in the UN agencies who are witnessing these different situations.

Inner City Press: But not the number of casualties? Can you identify...

Spokesperson: No, that we have no way to evaluate, really. I mean, we don't have observers there counting bodies; no, we don't.

Inner City Press: No, not counting bodies. But would it be helpful to have observers?

Spokesperson: It could be definitely helpful [to have access to the people in need]. And in terms of the invitation, yes, the Secretary-General received an invitation to go to Sri Lanka. He has not made any decision on when and whether he will go. Yes, Edie.

Question: Just a follow-up to Matthew's question. In the region,

it's well known among journalists that UN experts have done a calculation on the bare minimum of civilian casualties but that they are not releasing these figures, apparently for political reasons. And I wondered why those figures aren't being released when in Gaza, there were figures released regularly.

Spokesperson: The difference is that, in Gaza, we have 9,000 people who are, working there. There is a whole UNRWA contingent, as you know, in Gaza. Now, whether it is for political reasons, I would say I deny what you said. It is not for political reasons. It is simply because we cannot confirm those numbers. Those are estimates and we cannot actually broadcast estimates if we are not sure of what they are. These evaluations were made for the simple purpose of knowing how many people we were assisting, but they were not reliable in any way. They were just estimates. That's what they are. We cannot be issuing numbers that we're not sure of.

Inner City Press: I'm sorry to ask this; is the estimate higher or lower than the number the UN came out with for Gaza?

Spokesperson: That I cannot tell. I have to go back and see. I cannot tell you at this point.

[The Spokesperson later clarified that the United Nations does not generally issue casualty figures. When the recent United Nations flash appeal for Gaza was launched, for example, it attributed its casualty figures to the Palestinian Ministry of Health.]

Click [here](#) for [Feb. 12 debate on Sri Lanka](#)
<http://bloggingheads.tv/diavlogs/17772?in=11:33&out=32:56>

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