

# Mercenaries of London

Killing with pens, key boards and cameras

## An analysis of just one headline

By Sam Reading (July 2009)

It is well known that space / time in media can be bought. Unfortunately it is always not only commercial advertisement opportunities that are sold. From an innocent looking headline to inches of news paper articles could come to being through journalists with vested interests. If you don't believe, you can just ask the British publicist Max Clifford or similar companies in the industry. The danger behind this is most readers and viewers are inclined to accept what presented to them without questioning, establishing a lie or bent truth as facts. Purpose of this paper is to discuss one cunning aspect of 'inventive' headlines given to supposedly news items.

The headline we chose to discuss is **"Malnourished children' in IDP camps"**

( [Link1-  
http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2009/06/090623\\_idps\\_malnourished.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2009/06/090623_idps_malnourished.shtml) )

■ ) Our key point is that the headline does not reflect the article represented by it. However at first we analyse the headline and the contents of the article is discussed later. First of all it should be said that the headline is factually correct and entirely legal. The heading sounds a concerned voice about poor children. At the same time it gives the impression that children in the IDP camps are not taken care of. As that responsibility rests with the government of Sri Lanka, and the IDPs referred are Tamils, subtle message intended by this headline reads as 'Sri Lankan government mistreats displaced Tamil children'. And exactly that was the tone of many other web sites who picked up the article from *BBC Sinhala* site and used excerpts from it.

Apart from the obvious intention of discrediting the Sri Lankan government, this headline targets more viciously ordinary Tamil minds to sow hatred towards Sinhalese who seemingly controls the government, thus distancing the hopes of reconciliation further. For most colonial and neo-colonial powers who are meddling in Sri Lankan affairs, peace without ethnic segregation is a dreaded outcome. Hence the un-hindered campaign from their media and NGOs to recuperate the diminishing hatred continues. At the moment, as it is seen in this headline, they are brutally targeting Tamils in this campaign since Tamils are already been lead to a defeated state of mind by the same institutions. Thinking behind this approach is, that the people in such defeated state tend to hate others, therefore this is a good opportunity to strengthen the hatred.

**II ) The body of the article** is one struggle to manipulate the facts while pretending to be humanitarian. At the start the article says- *Nearly 5000 out of 30-35000 IDP children (from 250000-300000 IDPs) are malnourished and 15%-20% of them(sic) are also suffering from chronic malnutrition and acute malnutrition.* Now this sounds like a serious situation and of course worth writing headlines. But the key word here- “IDP-camps” seems a planted excess. A World Food Programme (WFP) report published in 2005 says- 35% of children in Sri Lanka are under nourished and the national average for children who are most severely affected, suffering from ‘wasting,’ is 14%. [\(Link2\)](#) Author seems not willing to enlighten the readers how the IDP children fared compared to the rest of the country. Had the author wanted to dramatized the piece more s/he could even compare it with India where the national average for ‘wasted’ is 16% and 47% children are under weight according to UNICEF. [\(Link3\)](#) Or the Pakistani Swat Valley IDP camps could have been a valid comparison too [\(Link4\)](#) Interestingly the headline of the article depicts the situation as unique to Sri Lankan IDP camps.

The article tries to portray as if the Sinhalese Sri Lankan government has miss-fed the Tamil IDPs throughout. And was careful not to mention that those people were in the government care only for a few days by the time it was written. And so is the fact that, most IDPs and specially children suffered many folds more before they managed to escape the human shield therefore they are now in a far better position, also went un-mentioned. For some one pretending to be a journalist with humanity who is writing for

the betterment of the society and healing among communities, there were many positive angles to view the situation. Instead, information such as the IDP children are well fed in the camps , Health Ministry is working together with NGOs and UNICEF, or there are special health programs targeting children, etc. get slightly mentioned only to cover up the otherwise exposed agenda.

Numerous dignitaries and UN officials who inspected the camps were heartened by the efforts of Sri Lankan government to keep the life in camps bearable. Those who have seen such facilities in other third world countries including India and Pakistan, [\(Link5\)](#) commended the government’s hard work and expressed their genuine opinions in public. [\(Link6\)](#) Such reports with fitting headlines are doing a tremendous job in reconciliation process.

It is not our job to suggest to journalists on apt headlines. But there could have been number of positive headlines to lead the article while discussing the plight of children in IDP camps. For an example The Hindu used the heading “*Visiting the Vavuniya IDP camps: an uplifting experience*” . Articles in printed media on the same subject used headings such as “Government programme to eradicate malnutrition among IDP children”, “Sarvodaya and government work together in IDP camps”, “300 doctors to serve in IDP camps”. All these headlines are factually correct, more representative of the prevailing situation in the camps and most of all would positively affect the readers of Tamil community. Unfortunately the BBC decided to use a misrepresentative, hate instigating and self serving headline instead.

**III )** And the **intended effect** does not stop there. Since the LTTE heydays this specific space of the BBC website has been used as a portal to plant news like items so that other web sites of the pro-LTTE network can re-use those articles (or headlines or parts of them) as if endorsed by BBC. Specially designed, inaccurate and one sided headlines were used with big suffix ‘-BBC’, in other web sites, concealing that they were not written by actual BBC journalists. In the same way, we could find 27 various web sites reproduced this article (or parts of it) with similar headlines, within 48 hours of the first publication of the item. This may or may not be orchestrated, but the angle and accusing tone were passed to each of them doing an enormous damage to ethnic harmony between communities. Thus fulfilling the wishes of the original writers.

Unfortunately this article turned out to be only a front runner to another ‘super headline’ article three days later. A UN official with links to the Sri Lankan conflict gives an interview on IDP children to the BBC Sinhala Service for no reason. This time the headline runs “S Lanka camp young ‘malnourished’ ” ([Link7](#)) Same statistics and names were used as the previous article with the added name of the UN official. The purpose or the need for a second article is not clear as it simply repeats the same details and concerns of the previous one. But we could find the headline, with or without the excerpts, reproduced in 19 web sites within 24 hours of the BBC article first published. This time with suffix ‘-BBC’ or ‘-UN’ prominently following headlines. So we can argue the author succeeded in spreading seeds of hatred through the web. (And three more days later

another article appeared carrying the head line “India ‘unhappy’ over Lanka IDPs” ([Link8](#)) in the same manner targeting India – Sri Lanka relationship. This may not have had the intended effect as Indian Government continuously maintained their satisfaction with the ongoing process. However the author should be ‘commended’ for making his attempt.

If one has any doubts about the agenda of the people involved, they only have to go through the headlines BBC used on Sri Lanka in their web site. Once simplified, the message can be read as- ‘The Sri Lankan government is Sinhalese and it is doing everything possible to harm Tamils there. We are here to remind of this truth to the world and especially to the Tamils. If anything good is done to Tamils by Sinhalese it should be an anomaly. Its existence in the past and present should be denied or its importance should be reduced to a triviality by mercenary journalism’.

Adhering to that they refuse to mention or publish pictures of smiling children in uniforms near their makeshift schools, men and women undergoing vocational training or patients getting treated by doctors when write about Sri Lankan IDPs.

**IV )** One should not forget that the BBC is a global brand name with a positive reputation among people around the world. That was built through many generations of British journalists with billions of pounds of tax payers’ money. It can be argued that a national asset is at stake when its name was allowed to be hijacked by various Interest Groups and let to be used as a utility to fulfill their agendas.

**Link1-** [http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2009/06/090623\\_idps\\_malnourished.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2009/06/090623_idps_malnourished.shtml)

**Link2-** <http://www.wfp.org/news/news-release/wfp-concerned-about-malnourished-children-sri-lanka>

**Link3** -[http://www.unicef.org/india/children\\_2356.htm](http://www.unicef.org/india/children_2356.htm)

**Link4-** <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/World/Pakistan/Miscarriages-disease-rife-in-displaced-Swat-IDP-camps/articleshow/4642588.cms>

**Link5-**<http://refugeewatchonline.blogspot.com/2006/02/despair-in-bru-idp-camps-in-india.html>

**Link6-** <http://www.hindu.com/2009/07/04/stories/2009070457542000.htm>

**Link7-** [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south\\_asia/8121198.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/8121198.stm)

**Link8-** [http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2009/06/090630\\_india\\_idps.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2009/06/090630_india_idps.shtml)

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Taken from an appendix to a study on misappropriation of British tax payers' money. The study (still underway as of 2009) is commissioned by **UK Taxpayers Association** ([www.uktaxpayersassociation.co.uk](http://www.uktaxpayersassociation.co.uk)) and covers UK's government and public sector institutions including BBC and defense establishments.