

*“In order to conduct a slaughter, you ensure the pornography is unseen, illicit at best. You ban foreigners and their cameras from Tamil towns such as Mulliavaikal, which was bombarded recently by the Sri Lankan army...”*

John Pilger, New Statesman, May 14, 2009

### Introduction:

On May 17, 2009 the Sri Lankan army claimed victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), an internationally designated terrorist organisation that had been fighting for a separate state in Sri Lanka for more than three decades. The government's declaration followed an LTTE media statement issued by the Tigers' head of international relations Selvarajah Pathmanathan, which effectively conceded defeat claiming “(the LTTE's) battle has reached its bitter end”.

However the jubilant celebrations in the Sinhala-dominated south were shadowed by claims of what international observers called a civilian ‘blood bath’, with initial United Nations reports claiming about 7000 civilians may have been killed in three months of fighting. More than 300,000 civilians in the crossfire were forced to trek to ‘safety’ across one of the deadliest battlefronts in south Asia. In later weeks there were reports the death toll had tipped 20,000 civilians.

Throughout the conflict numerous Sri Lankan governments prevented journalists from accessing the war-torn north, and independent coverage was thwarted through censorship, intimidation and travel restrictions. While journalists had at times been successful in bypassing government restrictions, more and more journalists were forced out of the conflict zone in the final few months as a result of even tighter regulations and the escalation of violence both in the war zone itself and against media practitioners directly. A number of journalists including a senior newspaper editor was allegedly killed by government-backed gunmen for criticising the government's handling of the crisis, a number of Tamil journalists were arrested on charges of supporting the Tigers, a military analyst was assaulted by masked assailants and foreign correspondents were denied visas to report from Sri

# New technologies and contested narratives: alternative conflict reportage in the final phase of the Sri Lankan war.

## Abstract

Sri Lankan government censorship may have prevented journalists from covering the final days of the civil war, but technological developments such as satellite technology shattered a government monopoly on information and sparked an international outcry over alleged human rights violations.

This paper focuses on the final days of the conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, staged in a conflict theatre denied external independent media coverage. It argues that the development of satellite imagery and its availability to ‘independent’ humanitarian agencies provided a somewhat unique media resource, providing alternative and diverse news voices which would have otherwise been censored by the Sri Lankan government. While arguing the hyper-real images of satellite and drone footage provide only a partial narrative of the conflict, this paper argues without it, the much needed debate on the human suffering and the civilian death toll may have been non-existent.

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Lanka – a British news team was also expelled from the country just days before the war ended.

In this context the media coverage of the final days of the military conflict relied heavily on advances in digital technologies that enabled journalists to report from a distance using supplied footage and remote interviewing. The new technologies which enabled journalists to piece together a more ‘complete’ picture of the conflict included satellite telephones, cheap digital recording equipment, free access to video sharing on the internet via sites such as YouTube, access to commercial satellite imagery, and to some extent visuals captured by Sri Lankan air force drones that were able to monitor civilian movement deep within the LTTE held ‘safe zone’.

### Background:

Between the mid 1970s and May 2009 the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were engaged in a militant conflict with the Sinhala-dominated government of Sri Lanka in a bid to liberate what is purportedly defined as the Tamil homeland – the state of Eelam, in the north and east of the country. Since the 1980s the conflict had escalated into a terrorist offensive with the LTTE considered responsible for countless suicide bombings, assassinations and killings, including those of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa. The LTTE’s navy, known as the Sea Tigers, was used for weapons smuggling. The Air Tigers, consisting of several light aircraft, launched a number of aerial attacks on the southern capital of Colombo. The Tigers survived an Indian army intervention between 1987 and 1991, and subsequently formed effective battlefield combat capabilities in the early 1990’s which complemented their guerrilla and terrorist tactics. Their increased battlefield capabilities and ability to hold territory also enabled the Tigers to carve out a quasi-state of Eelam un-penetrable by government forces, where the LTTE was able to enforce its own state apparatus including a Tiger police force and judiciary.

The Rajiv Gandhi assassination resulted in the Tigers being banned as a subversive group under the Indian penal code on May 14, 1992, and they were subsequently listed as a terrorist organisation in both the Indian Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance No. 9 of 2001 and the Prevention of Terrorism Act No. 15 of 2002. In addition the LTTE was listed or designated a terrorist group by a number of western nations including the US (1996), Britain (2001), Australia (2001), European Union (2005), and Canada (2006). Those bans in the post September 11 geo-political environment saw the LTTE’s front offices and overt political networks shrink in the west.

The military conflict between the government and the LTTE was punctuated by numerous attempts at peace and was divided into four periods of conflict named Eelam Wars I-IV. The last phase of the war began with the collapse of a Norwegian-negotiated peace process and the election of a Sinhala ultra-nationalist coalition government led by President Mahinda Rajapakse. Until this point numerous attempts to militarily defeat the LTTE including JR Jayawardena’s Vadamarachchi operation which ended with Indian intervention; the Indian military conflict with the Tigers between 1987-1991; and President Kumaratunge’s numerous military campaigns, all failed to yield a military solution, contributing to the view that the LTTE could not be defeated on the battlefield.

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<sup>1</sup> The Indian Ban on the LTTE was notified through a *Ministry of Home Affairs Notification – New Delhi, May 14, 1992, Gazette of India: Extraordinary* where the ban was imposed by the Central Government under authority granted through Section (1) of Section 3 of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 (37 of 1967). The reasons for the ban were listed as:

- (i) LTTE's objective for a homeland for all Tamils disrupts the sovereignty and territorial integrity of India and thus appears to fall within the ambit of an unlawful activity;
- (ii) LTTE has created the Tamil National Retrieval Troops (TNRT) and encouraged and aided its members to undertake unlawful activities in India;
- (iii) LTTE encourages and aids United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) which is an unlawful association;
- (iv) Persons and organisations derive inspiration and encouragement from LTTE for their unlawful activities as well as activities punishable under section 153B of the Indian Penal Code

But in what is now seen as the final phase of the long-running war, the LTTE did indeed suffer significant military losses on the front line, which saw the quasi-Eelam state they had established begin to crumble within a few months. The Tigers were finally forced to retreat to a small patch of land designated as a civilian safe zone by the Sri Lankan government on the Mullaitivu coastline at Puthumattalan. This was the beginning of the end for the LTTE.

On January 21, 2009 the government declared a 35.5sq km no-fire zone in the Vallipunam region within the Tiger control region, ostensibly to provide a safe haven for civilians – although it was presumed the retreating Tigers were among them. This zone was overrun by government troops as they moved further into Tiger territory. A second 14sq km safe zone was declared on February 12, 2009 which was further reduced to just two or three square kilometres by May 8. While an estimated 150,000-200,000 civilians managed to escape, a further 100,000 were estimated to be trapped with Tiger cadre within the May 8 safe zone– a small strip of land surrounded by the Nanthikadal lagoon on one side and the navy-controlled ocean on the other. While the LTTE claimed the civilians willingly stayed with the Tigers, the government alleged they were being used as human shields. Both parties accused the other of deliberately harming civilians.

The advancing government troops denied independent media and many aid agencies access to the safe zone, which prevented independent reportage of the crisis both from a news and humanitarian documentation level.

### **Media censorship and restrictions on covering the war:**

For much of the duration of the war access to the northern conflict zone was limited, with successive governments effectively banning journalists from entering Tiger-controlled parts of the country. Those who did enter the north illegally, usually did so through official Tiger intermediaries or were smuggled across borders by the Tiger supporters.

In 2001, Reuters journalist Waruna Karunathilaka claimed “severe restrictions have been imposed on journalists reporting from government areas of the north and east of the country, where the separatist war is being

fought. Since 1995 access to rebel-held areas has been totally denied with threats of serious actions under emergency regulations for any journalist who dared to break the ban” (April 29, 2001). While this ban was lifted during the 2002 peace negotiations and the subsequent opening of the A9 highway into the north, journalists were still expected to sign a police declaration stating they were entering the “un-cleared zone” against government warnings<sup>2</sup>. In 2002 Nirupama Subramanian (February 02-15, 2002) wrote in an article published in the Indian Frontline magazine that the government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe had “for the first time since 1995 ... allowed journalists to cross into LTTE-held northern Sri Lanka.” Since the collapse of the ceasefire agreement in January 2008, however, full travel restrictions had been reinstated.

Media access into LTTE controlled regions once again deteriorated in mid-2006, after more than four years of relatively uninterrupted access during the last round of peace negotiations. “Access to conflict zones is virtually impossible for journalists and the war of words and statistics between the government and the LTTE spilled over into the press,” the 2008 Reporters Sans Frontieres (RSF) annual report said. The group ranked Sri Lanka at 165 out of 173 in its press freedom index, a position that was lower than Pakistan, Iraq and Afghanistan. By early 2009, with the war escalating, the Tigers on the run, blatant media censorship in place and violence against independent media and commentary countered with direct violence, access to the war became virtually impossible.

On May 10, 2009 the Sri Lankan government deported British Channel 4 Reporter Nick Paton Walsh, producer Bessie Du and cameraman Matt Jasper. Paton Walsh told the UK Guardian Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapakse, the president’s brother, had called him and said, “....you have been accusing my soldiers of raping civilians? Your visa is cancelled, you will be deported. You can report what you like about this country, but from

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<sup>2</sup> The author, as researcher and as a journalist in Sri Lanka, has been subjected to government restriction and on recent visits has been forced to lodge and sign a police declaration stating personal details, including residential address in the south before being given permission to cross the Forward Defence Line. On previous occasions as a working journalist the author has smuggled himself into Tiger-controlled areas despite the government ban.

your own country, not from here.” Paton Walsh further said, “Our ‘crime’ had been to broadcast a report from internment camps at the northern town of Vavuniya, which can only be reached with the permission of the Sri Lankan army. The army orchestrates the visits and escorts you wherever you go. But someone working for us had managed independently to get a camera into the camps and record a series of interviews. The allegations were startling: bodies left for days, children crushed in the rush for food, the sexual abuse of women, disappearances” (Paton Walsh, May 10, 2009).

Paton Walsh’s expulsion from the country was the last in a long line of threats, intimidation, violence and censorship designed to gag the media, purportedly employed under the auspices of the Rajapakse brothers – Mahinda Rajapakse the Sri Lankan president and his sibling Gotabaya Rajapakse the Defence Secretary.

On February 01, 2009, Gotabaya Rajapakse accused three international news organisations – CNN, Al-Jazeera and the BBC of partisan reporting on the situation regarding civilian casualties and suffering in areas of conflict between government forces and Tamil separatist insurgents. The Colombo-based English daily, The Island reported Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapakse had warned “ambassadors, news agencies and INGOs acting ‘irresponsibly’ of ‘dire consequences’ if they attempt(ed) to give the LTTE terrorists a second breath of life.” The report quoted Rajapakse as saying “They will be chased away (if they try) to give a second wind to the LTTE terrorists at a time the security forces, at heavy cost, are dealing them the final death blow” (Satyapalan, February 1, 2009).

In another incident in early 2009 the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) said it was “disturbed to learn that the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) has been blocking and in other ways interfering with BBC World Service programs that SLBC has contracted to carry over its FM channels.” Subsequently the BBC withdrew its feed to Sri Lanka (IFJ, February 10, 2009).

Many Sri Lankan journalists also came under fire in the final months of the war. Sunday Leader editor Lasantha Wickrematunge, was murdered on January 08, 2009, allegedly by government-backed gunmen. In an editorial he wrote to be published in the event of his death, the journalist accused

defence secretary Rajapakse for his murder. Wickrematunge had been critical of the government’s war. Attacks on local media were commonplace. Three days after the state-owned Daily News criticised the Maharaja Media Group’s independent Sinhala language television channel Sirasa TV for its coverage of the Sri Lankan army’s successes in the north, the television station was attacked allegedly by government-backed mobs (IFJ, January 07, 2009). Nadesapillai Vithyatharan, editor of the Tamil daily newspaper Sudar Oli, was incarcerated for more than two months without charges on allegations the journalist had played a role in terrorist bombing although no charges were ever laid.

It is fair to say the independent media’s determination to cover the war without reverting to rewritten government press releases continued even in the face of such persecution. Their biggest struggle however was finding and accessing information, images and sources which told the other side of the story. In this environment journalists were forced to find alternative access to the war zone and those within, and as such used advances in technology to report from afar. The resulting news reportage therefore relied on expert interpretations of satellite images, Tiger ‘propaganda’ videos up-loaded through the internet, satellite telecommunication and even state ‘propaganda’ shot by air force drones.

### **Interpreting satellite images:**

In a BBC report on May 13, 2009 headlined ‘Sri Lanka images prove damage’, human rights groups including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International accused the Sri Lankan armed forces of using heavy artillery fire in the densely populated safe zone, despite continued assurances they would minimise civilian casualties. The report said a satellite imagery analysis commissioned by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International showed crater marks consistent with ‘heavy shelling’ and considerable population displacement between May 6 and 10.

The report said “satellite images taken on 10 May after a night of reported heavy fire were compared with images of the same area taken four days earlier. “By comparing before-and-after satellite images, we were able to see

a significant movement of the region's human population, suggesting widespread displacement," said Lars Bromley of the American Association of the Advancement of Science. "We also saw destroyed structures and circular, crater-like features consistent with widespread shelling. One area which had been packed with tents and other structures in the earlier photo was virtually empty in the image taken on 10 May." However the BBC report conceded that while the damage was consistent with 'heavy shelling' it was not possible to ascribe culpability. The report came a day after the rebels accused the army of shelling a field hospital in the safe zone killing 49 civilians.

Bromley's study of the satellite images was also picked up by the New York Times in a May 14 story headlined 'Under attack and on the move in Sri Lanka's conflict zone'. The report said "an analysis of satellite images taken of an area where an estimated 50,000 civilians are trapped shows evidence of shelling near civilian shelters." The New York Times reproduced some of the satellite images which detailed civilian movement through an analysis of a shift in temporary shelters in the region. The article also showed enlarged segments of the satellite image clearly identifying craters caused by shelling between May 6 and 10.

Both news stories were based on a study conducted by the American Association of the Advancement of Science (AAAS) published on May 12, 2009, which was subsequently cited by a number of human rights organisations including Human Rights Watch. According to the AAAS, high-resolution commercial satellite imagery collected by DigitalGlobe's WorldView and QuickBird satellites including WorldView scenes collected around 11.00 local time on May 6 and May 10, 2009 were used in the analysis. In addition to these images, an earlier scene collected from the QuickBird satellite on May 9, 2009 and a scene from the GeoEye satellite Ikonos, acquired on March 23, 2009, was also used to verify pre-conflict conditions in the conflict zone.

This use of satellite imagery provided readers and viewers with information and analysis of heavy artillery fire in the safe zone which would otherwise have gone unseen and unquestioned given the absence of camera crews on the ground in the north. In this respect the technology allowed clear evidence

of the shelling to be broadcast to the world despite Sri Lankan government efforts to limit coverage of the war zone.

In the face of this overwhelming satellite evidence of shelling in the safe zone, the Sri Lankan army was compelled to respond and published a report on its website on May 16 headlined 'When the camera lies for terror' refuting the validity of the BBC report. The military's story said; "It clearly shows that there are no damages to trees or permanent buildings. No signs of aerial attack or artillery fire. The right side image clearly shows signs of a mass evacuation of the makeshift shelters, probably temporary camps of the hostages who were dragged by the terrorist on the retreat as a human shield [sic]. If SLAF continued bombarding or SLA fired artillery, how could only the permanent buildings be left intact?"

AAAS's Lars Bromley who first analysed the images however disagreed and claimed "There is much damage to permanent buildings, but based on the satellite imagery alone there is no way to indicate who caused the damage" (personal communication, May 22, 2009). The original report also included a number of satellite images which were not published in the newspaper reports which clearly showed craters and damaged permanent structures.

Bromley also claimed that while the two images used on the army's website show no 'apparent' damage to trees and buildings "both could have sustained a lot of damage without it being visible to the satellite. Generally, significant damage is required for the satellite to be able to see it, which is due to the resolution of the satellite camera and other factors. Also, we read a lot of about air-burst shells being used, which would not necessarily damage either the tree or the house pictured. Note that in other areas of the satellite image, we saw much damage to permanent structures (personal communication, May 27, 2009)".

The narrative of satellite images and their role in the conflict continued to unfold in the aftermath of the war, with the London Times claiming American officials were examining images for evidence of war crimes – notably images taken by US military satellites which monitored Sri Lanka's

conflict zone during the last days of the war<sup>3</sup>. The newspaper's South Asian correspondent Jeremy Page claimed "The images are of a higher resolution than any that are available commercially and could bolster the case for an international war crimes inquiry." (Page, May 22, 2009). The Times' story further claimed "this is the latest example of how satellite technology is being used to monitor conflicts and hold governments to account for their actions. Satellite imagery is valuable in the case of Sri Lanka because the Government has banned almost all independent aid workers and journalists from the front line, blocking examination of alleged war crime scenes."

That being said, and aside from the evidentiary value of the images in terms of war crimes, it is worth noting that the Sri Lankan theatre was not the first to use satellite imagery as news fodder. The use of satellite images as news images was first explored during the US invasion of Iraq in 1991 – a practice that was actively discouraged by the US military (Palmer, 1992)<sup>4</sup>. However, with greater access to commercial satellites, the use of satellite images has been a growing phenomenon in news reportage in the past decade, particularly in conflict reportage.

Commenting on the humanitarian crisis in Darfur in 2003 Straus wrote "Satellite images show many areas in Darfur burned out or abandoned. The majority of the attacks have occurred in villages where the rebels did not have an armed presence..." (Straus, Jan-Feb 2005). In another example Jo Ellen Fair and Lisa Parks (2001) claim the 1994 humanitarian crisis in

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<sup>3</sup> The images were acquired by the National Geo-spatial Intelligence Agency (NGA), based in Bethesda, Maryland.

<sup>4</sup> "In 1987, a technical memorandum issued by the United States Office of Technology Assessment predicted that the news media eventually will gain access to remote imaging technology, and certain tradeoffs will be necessary because of the possible threats to national security and foreign policy. In 1989, an officer of France's SPOT Image Corp. told a U.S. Congressional subcommittee that its satellites were well adapted for commercial news gathering, because: "SPOT can take pictures of any location in the world regardless of political or physical limitations." The first test of this claim came during the opening days of the Persian Gulf crisis in August 1990 when SPOT officers in France and the United States denied requests by the news media for satellite images of the Kuwait-Iraq region because of the volatility of the crisis." [Palmer, Allen W. (1992). On the limits of a free press: remote imaging and commercial news gathering. International Communication Gazette, vol 49(3), pp 159-176]

Rwanda was better reported through the combination of 'on the ground' news footage and both satellite and aerial footage. They argued that while television footage was able to provide a human face to the crisis, the aerial images were able to visualise the horror of the mass exodus of civilians out of the conflict zone.

While Fair and Parks argue aerial and satellite imagery has played a central role in covering humanitarian crises in military conflicts from multiple vantage points, Thussu and Freedman (2003) argues the satellite images and computer generated graphics – the "high tech war reporting" that has gained momentum since the first Gulf war in 1991 – have dehumanised the true horrors of the war (p124).

In this context it can be argued that 'evidence' of heavy artillery use would not have reached the outside world without satellite technology and perhaps even more accurately without commercial access to satellite imagery. While these static images and the secrets they yield are impressive it is true they provide a perspective devoid of human suffering. At best the media consumer is only able to conjure an image of civilian suffering based on recalled images they have seen of real and dramatised conflict. This however does not mean the technological developments and the fast access to the perspective provided by satellite imagery is of no value. These images offer a 'unique' perspective of the en-mass civilian migration and the extent of the heavy artillery damage to the safe zone over a period of time. This 'evidence' based perspective would not have been possible through conventional reportage which would have relied on a journalist's assertion of heavy artillery attacks with only isolated visuals of limited damage seen through on-ground visuals. This however does not suggest the evidentiary value of satellite images is somehow better than traditional field reporting, rather that they are complementary and do indeed play a useful documentary role in lieu of other resources.

### **Sri Lankan Air Force drone footage: a bird's eye view.**

While the international media were reduced to covering the war through satellite images, Sri Lankan forces from time to time released images

collected by its Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) through the state-run Information Department. In the final stages of the war the government made great use of this type of video footage to ‘show the world’ their side of the civilian narrative, which claimed the LTTE had forcibly taken civilians and were using them as a human shield. While denying the government itself was attacking these civilian clusters with heavy artillery, government propaganda units, the state media and pro-government mainstream media continued to show aerial drone images of civilians fleeing the clutches of the LTTE, and footage which the state claimed was evidence of LTTE shooting fleeing civilians.

The Sri Lanka Air Force is believed to operate an unspecified number of US and Israeli built UAVs, including RQ-2 Pioneers, IAI Searchers, the older Israeli drones IAI Scouts and EMIT Blue Horizons IIs under the 11th Flying Squadron. In early 2009 internet blog forums were buzzing with the news that US weapons had reached the Sri Lankan army through Israeli intermediaries. In this context, bloggers revealed Sri Lankan forces had procured the next generation of surveillance equipment including the Star SAFIRE (Shipborne Airborne Forward-looking InfraRed Equipment) II (FLIR) EL/OP which was subsequently fitted to the air force’s Blue Horizon IIs.

Bloggers such as Ramblings of Konnapu5 posted images on March 15, 2009, purportedly taken through the Star SAFIRE II (FLIR) EL/OP and Blue Horizon II technology. The images conveniently marked bunkers, concealed artillery positions, fuel dumps and alleged LTTE positions within civilian settlements.

On April 20, 2009 a 4.14 minute video clip containing alleged Sri Lanka Air Force surveillance drone footage was uploaded to YouTube by a contributor using the name InfoDeptSriLanka. The clip titled ‘Escaping civilians from LTTE hostage -1’ showed 34 seconds of silent footage with an information kicker reading “The LTTE using a battle tank to fire on SF (Sri Lankan Forces) from within no fire zone”, followed by footage bearing a kicker 51\_\_\_\_\_

<sup>5</sup> The blogger’s namesake Konnapu Bandara was highland noble man who fled the Seethawaka kingdom in central Sri Lanka to join the Portuguese he later ascended the Kandyan throne in the Sri Lankan hills as Vimala Dharma Suuriya.

reading “Civilians held hostage by the LTTE escaping towards government-controlled areas.” The second segment of the clip containing the fleeing civilians consisted of two separate strings of visuals. The first sequence of images shows people running through a cluster of temporary shelters before crossing open land. The second string of images show people wading through waist deep water – presumably the Mullaittivu lagoon – to reach the other side where waiting tractors ferry them away. InfoDeptSriLanka uploaded a second video on April 22. This 10.41 minute clip titled ‘Escaping civilians from LTTE hostage 2,’ showed additional video of a mass civilian exodus from the conflict zone. Similar footage was uploaded by srilankanlion – the purported YouTube avatar of the www.nationalsecurity.lk website. On May 2, srilankanlion posted a two-part upload titled: ‘Exclusive aerial footages of intense LTTE activities inside the No-Fire-Zone at Mullaittivu’ 1 and 2. The first part of the video showed aerial footage of an alleged Tiger artillery gun redeployment in the Vellamullivaikkal region; while the second clip showed images of what was described as the LTTE ‘trailing a sea tiger attack craft into a canopy.’

Based on these drone images released by the department of defence it can be argued that the government media narrative in this respect was twofold;

Firstly it was designed to refute LTTE claims of civilians choosing to live within the safe zone, and showed a mass exodus of civilians into government-controlled regions, thus providing additional credence to state figures and government footage of refugees ‘fleeing’ the Tigers. This narrative also suggested (although the footage fails to support this) that the Tigers forcibly prevented people from leaving and at times had blatantly opened fire on those who attempted to evacuate the safe zone. These images also attempted to bolster government claims of the military offensive being a ‘humanitarian operation’ or ‘hostage rescue operation’. The 10.41 minute clip titled ‘Escaping civilians from LTTE hostage 2,’ contributed by srilankanlion showed a mass of purported civilians on the beach surrounded by alleged LTTE gunmen. The narrative accompanying these images stated the LTTE had drawn a line in the sand using a tractor and had threatened to shoot any civilians crossing it.

Secondly the drone video was aimed at proving the Tigers were active in the safe zone and were launching attacks on government forces, which would

necessitate the troops retaliating. In this context however images such as those contributed by srilankanlion failed to show a militarily active enemy, with the images showing the Tigers moving an artillery gun and hiding an attack boat – acts which were not overly militant. In contrast InfoDeptSriLanka's clip on April 20, 2009 titled 'Escaping civilians from LTTE hostage -1' was more conclusive as it showed a "...battle tank to fire on SF (Sri Lankan Forces) from within no fire zone".

However, in the absence of independent verification it is critical that minute detail within the footage should be examined for veracity and in this context it is interesting to note that the date on srilankanlion's May 02, post of 'exclusive aerial footages of intense LTTE activities inside the No-Fire-Zone at Mullaitivu, part 2,' does not match with the timeframe shown on the video itself. The date on the lower right-hand corner of the frame reads '13-Mar-2009'<sup>6</sup>. Similarly the first part of the post showing alleged LTTE cadre moving artillery shows a similar discrepancy, with the dateline reading '26-Feb-2009.' Interestingly, with the exception of one string of video footage which has been edited into a number of segments with a dateline of '20.04.09', a significant number of srilankanlion's clips contain illegible datelines although the basic shape of some does seem to match the April 20, 2009 timeline. While the veracity of some clips are questionable, based on independent sources and an assessment of the aftermath of the conflict, it is clear that large numbers of people did in fact trek through the treacherous frontline as the government suggested. Perhaps it is worth noting that the narrative of the exodus contains two layers of information packaged together, the exodus as an event and the politico-military reasons surrounding it. In this context there is little doubt the people did en mass move out of the conflict zone during the last few days of the war, but the government subtext presented as the reason for the event remains questionable.

The aerial drone images coupled with defence and state television footage, provided the only visual images of the mass exodus of civilians out of the Mullaitivu region. State news bulletins produced by the State-owned Rupavahini Corporation and the ironically named Independent Television

<sup>6</sup> The image is blurred and the date seems to be 13 though the number 3 is not clear, while the year barely legible seems to be 2009. However the 'Mar' for March is clearly visible.

Network provided lengthy news bulletins stitched together from Google Earth satellite images, Air Force drone footage, defence and state media visuals of 'refugees' on the government side of the Forward Defense Line (FDL) and vitriolic on-camera stand-ups from unwavering nationalistic reporters employed by the state.

While the drone images were unable to show the suffering of small groups of people or in other words put a human face to the suffering, they were able to convey the magnitude of the conflict and civilian exodus from a perspective rarely seen through on-ground video footage. The serpentine trails of people pouring out of the safe zone and the clusters of people allegedly held back by gunmen, conjures powerful images despite the obvious handicap of not being able to 'put human a face' to the victims. At this level technology provided not only a unique overall perspective of the human exodus, but also the only indication the outside world would have of the enormity of the crisis.

### **Hyper-reality and war reportage in the Sri Lank theatre:**

While both the satellite images and drone footage, in the absence of independent battlefield footage, furthered media debate, both remain hyper-real. In his essay *Travels through hyperreality* Umberto Eco argued the fabricated hyper-real was replacing the real, and the hyper-real was frequently presented as something better than the real. Of course Eco's arguments are based on the hyper-reality of theme parks which are a cultural façade of a commercial sales pitch, and not a conflict theatre of a civil war. But his observations offer some insight into the analysis of satellite and drone images of the Sri Lankan conflict.

The en-mass civilian migration and the extent of the heavy artillery damage to the safe zone shown in the satellite images, remain a portrayal of alleged reality and not reality itself, therefore what is shown through these images is perhaps at best an alternative perspective and not a suitable substitute for 'on the ground' field reportage.

The argument here is similar to that of Jean Baudrillard's *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, a frequently misunderstood argument which simply questions how anyone can truly be aware of the war when no-one, including

the combatants, witnesses the war but a hyper-reality of war filtered through computer systems and precision guided missile inter-phases. The 'war' at least from the American perspective, Baudrillard argues, existed more as television footage and satellite images and not a battlefield engagement of traditional war. He argues "It is a masquerade of information: branded faces delivered over to the prostitution of the image, the image of an unintelligible distress. No images of the field of battle, but images of masks, of blind or defeated faces, images of falsification."

The Sri Lankan military, unlike the US forces in the first Gulf War, cannot be accused of not engaging the Tigers in battlefield combat, nor were the Sri Lankan civilians outside of the combat zone mere media consumers without first-hand experience of the conflict. With numerous waves of civilian displacement and the constant threat of 'terrorist' attacks, the war frequently leached out of the northern combat zone. By its own admission the Sri Lankan government lost more than 6200 soldiers and sustained 30,000 casualties in the last three years of conflict – a far cry from the Gulf War in which Baudrillard provocatively argues claimed fewer soldier lives than car crashes would have at home in the US.

However Baudrillard's somewhat exaggerated comments have some bearing on the media coverage of the Sri Lankan theatre, at least from an international perspective. Here the war between the government troops and the Tamil Tigers and the resulting civilian suffering is reduced not even to video footage, but to two dimensional satellite images – representations of the reality which in turn require expert interpretation. Perhaps one could argue any visual representation of a conflict is hyper-real – a pastiche of the real life drama, in a world where images of fact and realistic fiction are constantly in conflict. But in the Sri Lankan scenario the argument must be a hierarchy of image legibility and credibility, for while field reports and footage filed by independent journalists are readily comprehended by viewers, satellite images and drone footage require an additional filter of interpretation. Therefore in the case of the Sri Lankan war, in reportage through satellite images and drone footage, it is not only distress that is unintelligible; the image itself is clinically diagrammatic and representative.

Maclear's discussion of the militarisation of vision argues "a physical and arguably, aggressive distance for viewing" has now been established though

technology. Basing the argument on the Gulf War Maclear claims, "Smart bombs with electronic eyes made us spectators to satellite, real-time images in such a manner as to tacitly approve the mass killing of civilians from the air. With its spectacle of visual bombing, late-twentieth-century warfare has increasingly fashioned the terms for detached and cruel viewing." Perhaps it is not the electronic eyes of the bombs that are taking images in the Sri Lankan theatre, but it is the eyes of the military drones used for target selection and intelligence gathering in the government's war against the LTTE. The images are not only biased, but a hyper-real representation of a partial truth – a sliver of information packaged by the military media machine. At the heart of the argument then, is the nature of 'truth' represented by these images. Umberto Eco (1976) argues that if signs can be used to elicit a truth, then signs can also be used to lie. The same satellite images offer two conflicting interpretations, with an 'independent' US expert suggesting an attack on civilians and a 'biased' government defence expert suggesting inconsistencies. The same can be said of the government's own narrative on its self-produced drone footage.

### **The notion of journalistic 'truth':**

While the satellite images offered a new perspective and were able to generate media dialogue that would have otherwise been buried under the government censorship, it is perhaps arguable if the images were successful in bypassing the information blackout imposed through the government censorship. Similarly the government drone footage provided a counter argument, but it is equally arguable the vision was accepted by the media as 'reliable' aerial footage representing an acceptable 'truth'. It is perhaps worth noting that 'truth' in a journalistic sense functions within the notion of a hierarchy of truths, and within the socio-cultural context in which it is placed. Journalism does not profess to seek an absolute truth in a philosophical sense or an empirical truth in scientific sense. As Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) argue journalism deals with a 'reasonable' truth. This journalistic truth, as in the case of 'reasonable' truth in a legal sense, attempts to present a multitude of competing and inherently biased arguments in a bid to elicit a reasonable truth.

It is obvious that no news report of a war, or for that matter any news report, can present an undeniable truth. The purpose of news coverage then must be the coverage of an event in a manner which outlines a reasonably true representation of that event. In the case of the humanitarian crisis in Sri Lanka at the close of the 25-year civil war, the report must then look at numerous sources to uncover 'what really happened'. This tenet in journalist methodology, Tom Goldstein and Howard Baker (2007) argues, is why "Balanced coverage – that is, telling both sides of the story – became one of the pillars of traditional journalism. But the truth cannot be achieved by journalist acting as stenographers, merely balancing opposing statements. They must dig beneath the rhetoric to get at the primary source." (p70). If this is the case, news coverage of the Sri Lankan conflict based on satellite images and drone footage must not only present both types of images to the viewers but also make a value judgement of the specialist interpreters and their credibility within the overall narrative.

### Conclusion:

Based on the satellite images of the last throes of the Sri Lankan war, it is clear civilian settlements in the safe zone came under artillery fire from either the government or the LTTE, there is plausible reason to believe that the government remains the most likely perpetrator of these attacks. Based on the Sri Lankan Air Force drone footage it is equally clear the civilians came under fire from LTTE cadre as they attempted to leave the grossly misnamed safe zone – a behaviour consistent with the LTTE military strategy of maintaining a human shield. A high density of civilians in the region was vital for the LTTE's military objectives and therefore it would have been tactically beneficial for the Tigers to discourage and actively hinder civilian migration out of the safe zone. With media unable to access the war zone, these conclusions can only be drawn because of the reports produced by the media as it harnessed digital communication technologies such as satellite imagery and drone footage.

There is no doubt, the hyper-real images present only a partial 'truth' of the final days of the war, and as such should not be seen as a substitute for news reports from the field. Therefore the Sri Lankan government's media censorship and restricted access to the war zone was yet successful in curbing traditional news coverage of the conflict. However the availability of modern technology, especially in the case of satellite images, resulted in alternative news voices breaking through the government stranglehold.

As Friedrich Nietzsche argued, "There is only a perspective 'seeing', only a perspective 'knowing' and the more affects we allow to speak about one thing, the more eyes, different eyes we use to observe one thing, the more complete will our 'concept' of the thing, our 'objectivity' be". Therefore the objectivity of media coverage in the Sri Lankan theatre should have been achieved through a combination of LTTE and Government media sources, independent news report from journalist in the combat zone, together with hyper-real and analytical images such as satellite images and drone footage.

As such there is little doubt the media censorship resulted in impoverished reports of the conflict, but the argument still stands that the government failed to completely censor the alleged human atrocity due to technological advancements that denied the government absolute monopoly of information.

The scenario in Sri Lanka is not the first nor the last time this kind of technology has been deployed in newsgathering. As governments and militias tighten their controls on media access to sensitive zones and dissemination platforms, it is likely media practitioners will turn more to alternative means to assemble their reports.

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