

## **The Amnesty Campaign: Taking the Eye Off the Ball**

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A lot of heat and indeed anger has been generated by the Amnesty International campaign - Sri Lanka: Play By the Rules – timed to coincide with and targeted at the Cricket World Cup in the Caribbean. Amnesty has made clear that the campaign is not targeted at the Sri Lankan cricket team and in response to criticisms of this nature made the point that the issue is not cricket but human rights and that all right thinking and mature adults will not mistake the campaign as in any way making a comment on or seeking to undermine our cricket team.

The criticisms against the Amnesty campaign come from a number of quarters – the government and political parties, local NGOs and from diaspora groups. They range from a full frontal attack on Amnesty and its bona fides as regards human rights protection in Sri Lanka - some include other international human rights organizations as well for good measure – to direct accusations that the intention of the campaign is to undermine our team's performance at the World Cup. Others point out that the campaign is ill timed and strategically flawed; it is self defeating and impacts adversely on local and international efforts to strengthen human rights protection in Sri Lanka. Amnesty is castigated as being pro- LTTE and neo imperialistic, hypocritical and selective in that it has not launched such a campaign against the human rights record of other contestants in the World Cup like England for example. And, how about Zimbabwe, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan ?

Clearly human rights is a sensitive issue at any time. Likewise, cricket a sacrosanct one in the public mind at all times and especially during a World Cup, given our promising performance. Sadly, in the public mind it certainly appears to be the case that the latter has much greater prominence and priority than the former. This is reinforced by the argument that the cricket team is a microcosm of what we should be and ought to be – a multi ethnic and religious group based on merit and performance and working together successfully as a team. It is something of which we can be justifiably proud of as a country.

The righteous outrage and criticisms of Amnesty aside, there is no questioning the deplorable situation in the country as far as human rights protection is concerned. It is a situation that preceded the World Cup and sadly has every prospect of continuing beyond the 28<sup>th</sup> April final and beyond. The work of international human rights organizations in highlighting this and in lobbying for strengthening human rights protection must be acknowledged, appreciated and supported. Likewise, the work of local groups. The Government of Sri Lanka posits the establishment of the Commission of Inquiry (COI) into egregious cases of human rights violations and the Independent International Group of Eminent Persons (IIGEP) to observe its work, as a key demonstration of its commitment to human rights protection. That it sought and received the views of Amnesty International in this process attests to the bona fides of such organizations in respect of human rights protection in Sri Lanka and indeed, of the standing in which the

GOSL holds Amnesty when it comes to consultation as far any initiatives it chooses to make in this field. After all it was reported that President Rajapaksa no less, had discussions with the Secretary General of Amnesty International when he visited the UK in 2006.

The point about the Amnesty campaign is that it is in danger of being self defeating and of ricocheting on the efforts, both local and international, for human rights protection in Sri Lanka. Any campaign as a basic fundamental element of it, must have a clear and unequivocal message – one that cannot be confused or conflated with any other message and particularly one that is unintended and liable to detract from the original, intended message. The Amnesty campaign clearly falls short on this score. It opens itself to the interpretation, mischievous or otherwise, of undermining the cricket team and is additional fodder to the local, self proclaimed patriots who will no doubt garnish their rhetoric about traitors with reference to the Amnesty campaign.

There may well be the charge that local human rights organizations were aware of the campaign before it was launched or that they had a part to play in conceiving of it in these terms. As far as this columnist is aware this was not the case and consultation with locals is something that should be flagged as a sine qua non for the future. Amnesty may well make the point that this is an international campaign and meant for an international audience. It is not intended for a local audience or primarily for a local audience. Whilst this may be the case, the impact on popular perceptions locally and on the work of local groups cannot and should not be dismissed or ignored. Consultation and inclusiveness are surely good practices in any field and basic prerequisites for cooperation, collaboration and solidarity.

The full extent of the impact and damage of this campaign is yet to be seen. One hopes that public discourse on human rights protection in Sri Lanka is not going to be irretrievably obscured and obfuscated by reference to the rights and wrongs of this campaign or that Sri Lankans will in any way be deterred from lending their voice to the urgent need for human rights protection in this country, by concerns about being unpatriotic that have been aroused by memories of this campaign.

The Amnesty campaign has been clumsily and insensitively conceived. It as made an issue of itself in Sri Lanka and detracted attention from the issue in Sri Lanka it rightly sought to draw attention to.

We must win the World Cup, BUT, we must protect human rights in this country. One is a game; the other is about rights and duties, of matters of life and death. It is what makes us a country before all else.