

Israel and Sri Lanka: a media analysis of war crimes allegations

June 2009

Abstract

How did the UK print media report the recent conflict in Sri Lanka? Was the Sri Lankan government subjected to the same level of scrutiny over the Tamil civilian death toll as was Israel for Palestinian casualties in Gaza? In both cases allegations of war crimes were made on account of reportedly indiscriminate attacks in civilian areas. UN agencies and NGOs accused Israel and Sri Lanka of disregarding the safety of the civilian populations associated with their opponents in favour of pursuing their military objectives. Just Journalism conducted research into broadsheet newspaper coverage of war crimes allegations against Israel and Sri Lanka during the first five months of 2009.

Key findings:

- Across the five daily broadsheets, war crimes allegations in relation to Israel were addressed twice as often as war crimes allegations in relation to Sri Lanka
- Four out of five daily broadsheets associated Israel with war crimes more often than Sri Lanka. In the most extreme case, the possibility of Israeli war crimes was addressed almost four times as often as the possibility of Sri Lankan war crimes in one newspaper
- The first three months of hostilities this year between Israel and Hamas saw 75 articles addressing the possibility of Israeli war crimes in Gaza
- In contrast, during the first three months of the final phase of military operations in Tamil-held territory, only one article addressing the possibility of war crimes in Sri Lanka had been published

Introduction

This briefing compares the volume of references to war crimes in relation to the conflicts in Gaza and Sri Lanka, between January and May 2009 in the British press.

In February 2009, Just Journalism published 'Gaza conflict: a media analysis,' a comprehensive report addressing how the UK media reported Israel's actions in Gaza from late December 2008 to mid-January 2009. The conflict led the news agenda for weeks and all aspects of Israel's conduct came under heavy scrutiny. During this same period, and within a week of the start of hostilities in Gaza, a turning point was reached in another conflict; that between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil separatist group the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the north of Sri Lanka. In early January 2009, after 26 years of fighting, government forces took the rebel army stronghold of Kilinochchi and proceeded to push the Tamil insurgents to a decisive military defeat. On 19 May, Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapaksa declared total victory.

Questions about whether the Sri Lankan military had behaved in accordance with international law were being raised by NGOs soon after its actions in Kilinochchi. In February, Human Rights Watch released 'War on the displaced', a report accusing the government of 'indiscriminate' use of force in civilian areas and alleging that 'numerous violations of international humanitarian law' had taken place in Sri Lanka. On 29 May, The Times alleged that 20,000 civilians had died as a result of government shelling in the closing weeks of the months-long war¹.

Similar allegations of war crimes were levelled against Israel during and after its 23-day military campaign in Gaza, in which as many as 1,400 Gazans were killed, with disputed proportions of civilians amongst them². Testimonies of

Israeli soldiers suggesting misconduct were first published in the Israeli media on 19 March³ and were reproduced in news outlets across the globe. These were followed by the publication of an investigation in The Guardian on 24 March in which video footage was presented⁴.

Volume of coverage

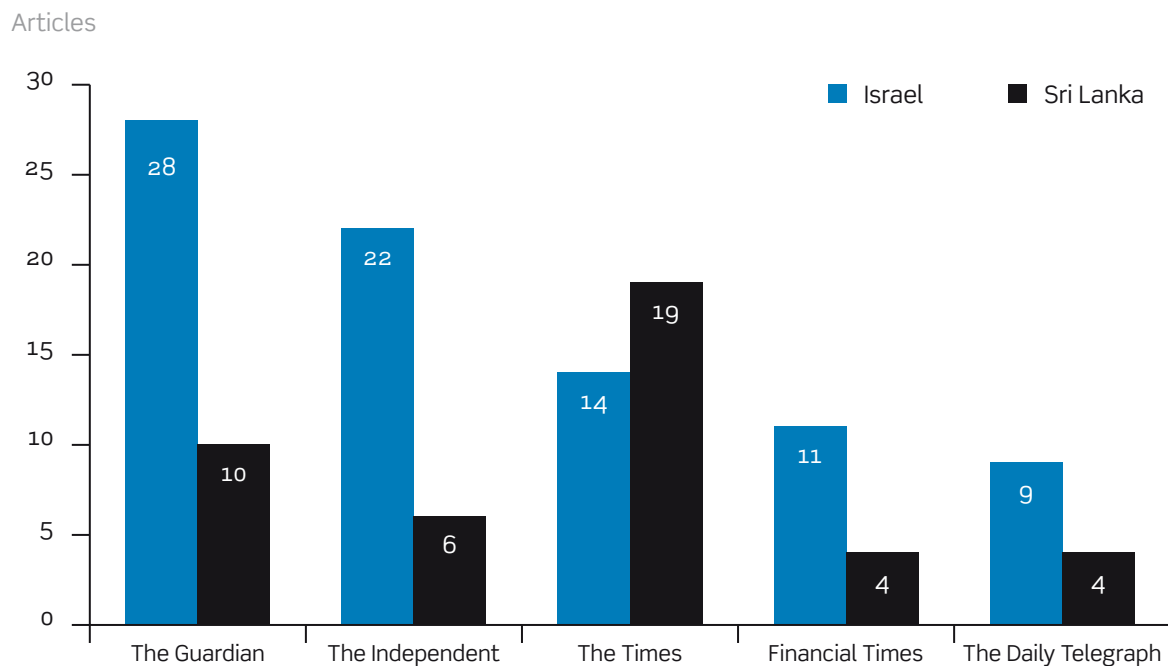
In view of the common raising of the war crimes spectre, Just Journalism conducted research into how often the daily broadsheets addressed war crimes allegations in relation to Israel and Sri Lanka. For the first five months of 2009, articles were collated in which the term 'war crimes' was used in association with Israel or Sri Lanka. References had to relate specifically to either Israel's conduct in Gaza between December 2008 and January 2009 or Sri Lanka's conduct against Tamils in 2009.

The publications analysed were:

- Financial Times
- The Daily Telegraph
- The Guardian
- The Independent
- The Times

Sunday equivalents were not included. The results are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The volume of articles addressing war crimes relating to both Israel and Sri Lanka, by newspaper



Sample: 129 editions of each newspaper, January to May 2009

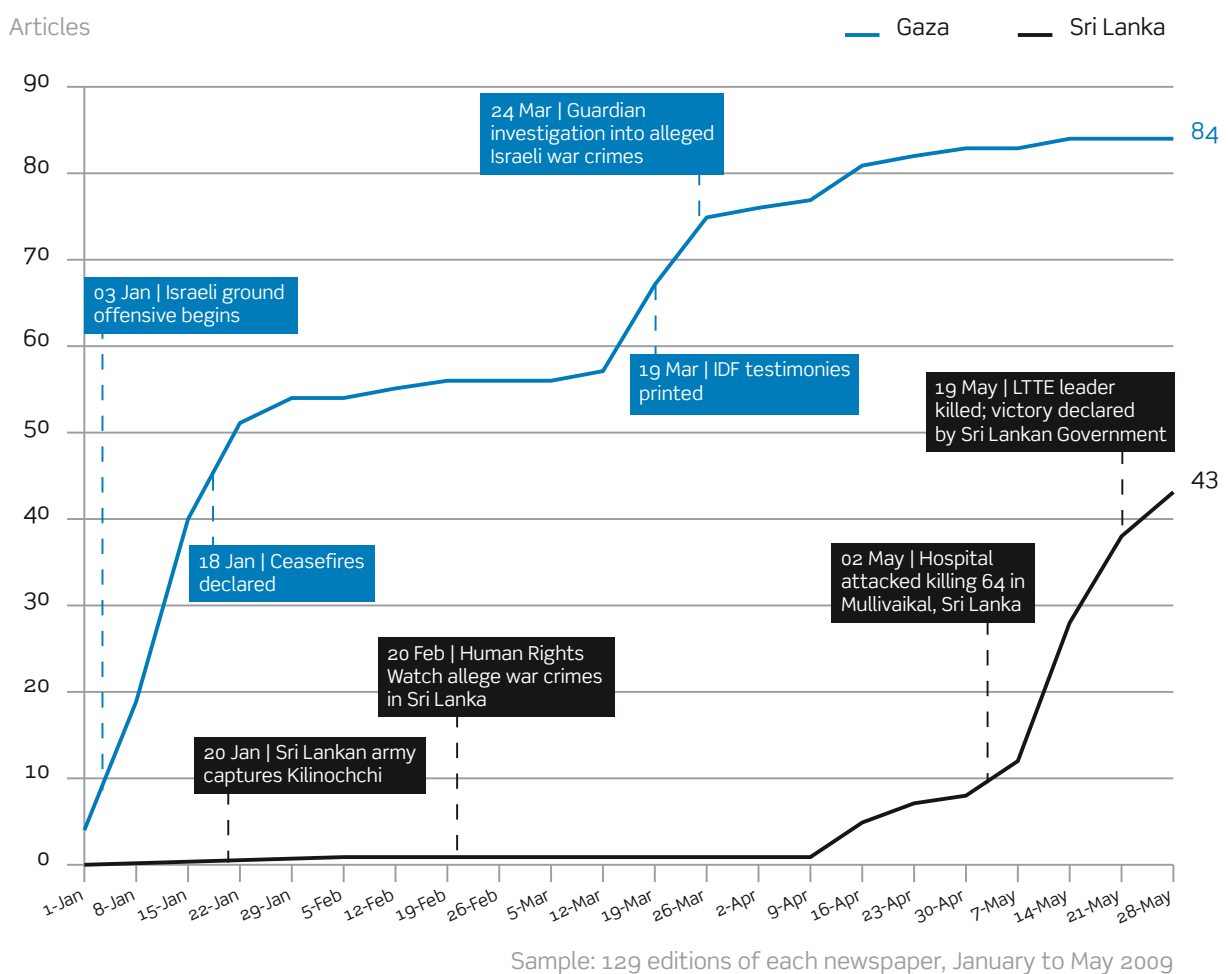
As the graph shows, in four out of five publications Israel was linked with war crimes more than twice as much as Sri Lanka in this period. The Independent implicated Israel (22) almost four times as often as Sri Lanka (6). Only The Times bucked the trend, publishing a third more articles associating war crimes with Sri Lanka (19) than with Israel (14).

This result demonstrates that the spectre of war crimes was raised in association with Israel at an emphatically higher rate than with Sri Lanka. This indicates that there has been a significantly higher interest in reporting stories or engaging in editorial discussion about the possibility of Israel committing war crimes in Gaza than Sri Lanka committing war crimes in Tamil-held areas.

Coverage in the context of events on the ground

As well as comparing the volume of articles addressing war crimes in relation to Israel and Sri Lanka, an analysis of how the coverage related to relevant events over the period was also produced. The results are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. How the volume of articles addressing war crimes relating to both Israel and Sri Lanka changed in relation to key developments



This analysis indicates:

- The press were quicker to address possible war crimes in Gaza, than in Sri Lanka.** References to alleged Israeli war crimes in Gaza began to be published one week after military hostilities began, and as soon as Israel began its ground invasion of Gaza. In contrast, it was more than one month before references to alleged Sri Lankan war crimes appeared, long after government troops took control of the rebel stronghold Kilinochchi, from which time the deaths of Tamil civilians escalated. There had still only been one article making such a reference

three months into hostilities in Sri Lanka. Meanwhile, 75 articles addressing the possibility of war crimes in Gaza had been published.

- **The response to NGO reports was inconsistent.** The volume of articles addressing the issue of war crimes in relation to Sri Lanka did not change after Human Rights Watch, a leading NGO, reported ‘attacks by Sri Lankan forces that caused high civilian casualties and may have been indiscriminate in violation of the laws of war’⁵. In contrast, the identifiable surge in articles addressing war crimes in Gaza in March coincided with the Guardian’s investigation and related reports by Amnesty International, Physicians for Human Rights Israel and Human Rights Watch⁶.
- **The total number of articles was greater for war crimes in relation to Gaza.** At the end of the five month period analysed, just under twice as many articles addressing war crimes associated with Israel (84) had been published in the five broadsheets analysed than war crimes associated with Sri Lanka (43).

Conclusions

These findings suggest that the UK broadsheets took a markedly different approach to addressing the issue of war crimes in relation to Israel and Sri Lanka.

Figure 1 indicates a much stronger proclivity to report and comment on the issue as it relates to Israel than to Sri Lanka. Figure 2 intimates that there was a media appetite for a discourse on Israeli war crimes very early into the Gaza conflict, as well as a higher sensitivity to NGO reports on the issue, in contrast to the media’s coverage of the Sri Lankan conflict.

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- 1 Catherine Philp, ‘The hidden massacre: Sri Lanka’s final offensive against Tamil Tigers’, The Times, 29 May 2009
 - 2 Ben Hubbard, ‘UN’s Gaza war crimes investigation faces obstacles’, Associated Press, 9 June 2009
 - 3 Amos Harel, ‘IDF in Gaza: Killing civilians, vandalism, and lax rules of engagement’, Haaretz, 19 March 2009
 - 4 Clancy Chassay & Julian Borger, ‘Guardian investigation uncovers evidence of alleged Israeli war crimes in Gaza’, The Guardian, 24 March 2009
 - 5 ‘War on the Displaced: Sri Lankan Army and LTTE Abuses against Civilians in the Vanni’, Human Rights Watch, February 2009
 - 6 ‘Rain of Fire: Israel’s Unlawful Use of White Phosphorus in Gaza’, Human Rights Watch, 25 March 2009
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