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Media release

US company's "Sri Lanka 2017 Country Review" challenged: full of errors, disinformation says Global SL Forum

"Sri Lanka 2017 Country Review," one of many country reports published by CountryWatch, a prominent US-based information provider to universities, government agencies, libraries etc., is so full of disinformation, errors, and outdated information that the Global Sri Lankan Forum (GSLF) decided to re-examine and discuss some of the highly obvious misconstructions.

The Forum, with the assistance of the Sri Lanka-US Political Affairs Council (SLUPAC) of California, has published a blog which highlights the noteworthy errors/disinformation in the report published online in May 2017 with comments on each as attached below.

In addition, the Forum sent a statement to the universities and libraries that are known subscribers of CountryWatch reports cautioning them that despite CountryWatch's claims of the Country Review series being "up to date," some critical statistics, such as economic indices, are "woefully outdated."

It was pointed out that the fact that President Mahinda Rajapaksa's name has been misspelled (as Rajpaks) 69 times throughout the report is, by itself, a clear indication of the lack of editorial oversight.

"It falls short of the standards required of a publication that is providing information to universities, schools, libraries, and government agencies," the statement said.

The 397-page online report titled "Sri Lanka 2017 Country Review" attempts at providing a panoramic insight into developments in Sri Lanka beginning with the island's early history and including the LTTE war and recent political changes.

CountryWatch, based in Texas, introduces itself on its website as "[A]n information provider for corporations, government agencies, universities, schools, libraries and individuals needing up-to-date news and information on each of the recognized countries of the world." It describes its staff as having extensive international business experience and members of the editorial department as coming from strong academic backgrounds.

The blog may be accessed at: <https://countrywatchslreport.wordpress.com>

Ranjith Soysa
SPOKESPERSON – GSLF

Introduction

CountryWatch (www.countrywatch.com) is the publisher of several country-specific data and intelligence reports apparently for the use of corporations, government agencies, universities, schools, libraries and individuals and says it provides “up-to-date news and information on each of the recognized countries of the world.”

CountryWatch further claims that its management has “extensive international business experience” while members of the editorial department have “strong academic backgrounds.” It also claims to provide “critical” country-specific intelligence data to “a global audience including public and private sector organizations with overseas operations and global interests.”

Reviewing the PDF online of “2017 Country Review on Sri Lanka” (Read: SL Country Watch), we found misinformation, errors, and even some old data.

As a publication aimed at the academic and business communities, CountryWatch should be judicious and objective in the content it presents. Yet, very strong bias against the former Rajapaksa administration runs through the pages. Uncorroborated, even false, reports used by Rajapaksa’s political opponents to vilify the former president have found their way into this report. While editors are certainly entitled to their opinion, passing opinion and commentary as facts seriously undermines the integrity of any publication.

In general, the publication lacks critical analysis, is not well organized, and is an assortment of material apparently culled from various sources, most of it not even related to Sri Lanka.

Page after page of general information under topics such as “Environmental Overview” pad the size of the publication but do nothing to enhance the Sri Lanka-specific knowledge its readers are likely seeking.

The same could be said of the “Editor’s Note” – which is repeated word for word on pages 2, 78, 122, & 145: adds pages, nothing else.

The fact that President Mahinda Rajapaksa’s name has been misspelled (as Rajpaks) 69 times throughout the report doesn’t speak well for editorial oversight.

We are politically unaffiliated and independent Sri Lankan expatriate groups. Our only purpose in putting the following detailed comments together is to correct inaccuracies and present facts omitted or misrepresented by CountryWatch. .

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Start reading critique on “2017 Country Review on Sri Lanka

Dismissing the record of a popular Asian leader as “spurious” – Page 76



“In August 2015, ahead of election day, it was unclear if Rajapaksa’s political ambitions to become prime minister would be realized. His spurious record as president, and in particular reports of abuse of power, were creating challenges for a man who believed he was entitled to power in Sri Lanka. Now, however, the political landscape had changed and the public’s appetite for a return to Rajapaksa’s influence appeared sharply diminished.

Our Comment

Spurious record? As president, Rajapaksa had several achievements to his credit: ending the war, rehabilitating thousands of former militant terrorists, high economic growth, infrastructure development. In a 2012 Gallup poll of the Asian region to find the chief executive

with the highest approval rating, President Rajapaksa ranked third with a 91 percent approval rating. Dismissing a popular Asian leader as “spurious” shows bias (if not ignorance of the word’s meaning and connotations) as well as the arrogance typical of westerners who have little understanding of the political and social dynamics of lesser developed countries and foreign cultures.

Where is the evidence that Rajapaksa “believed he was entitled to power in Sri Lanka?” This is mere opinion that might find a place in an op-ed.

The anti-Rajapaksa bias is in tandem with the United States’ policy in Sri Lanka. The U.S. has been accused of engineering the regime change that ousted Rajapaksa in 2015 and brought back to power its longtime ally, the United National Party.

It must be noted that having successfully ended the war in 2009, the Rajapaksa government turned its attention to the economy. Between 2010 and 2015 Sri Lanka boasted an impressive rate GDP, growth rate, and per capita. While many of the Western countries grew by 2-3% annually, Sri Lanka’s annual growth rate held steady between 6.2 – 8%. These rates were among the highest in South Asia.

Sri Lanka Economic indicators		
GDP: Gross domestic	2014	74941
GDP: Gross domestic	2010	49566
GDP: Gross domestic	2005	24406
GDP growth rate (anr	2014	7.4
GDP growth rate (anr	2010	8
GDP growth rate (anr	2005	6.2
GDP per capita (curre	2014	3634.6
GDP per capita (curre	2010	2453.6
GDP per capita (curre	2005	1249.9
SOURCE -UN Data		

Reference to pre-election violence falsely blamed on Rajapaksa –Page 77

“Meanwhile, Sri Lanka’s national security landscape turned dangerous in late July 2015. At issue was the fact that Finance Minister Ravi Karunanayake was targeted in a drive-by shooting at an election rally. Finance Minister Karunanayake characterized the apparent assassination attempt an “act of political terrorism,” and placed the blamed on pro-Rajapaksa factions, as he declared: “This act is a complete breach of democracy sponsored by a bankrupt opposition.”

Our Comment:

The foreign media, particularly the New York Times, seized on this incident that occurred July 31, 2015, blaming former President Rajapaksa based merely on allegations by rival politician Ravi Karunanayake. Within hours of the shooting, police investigations had uncovered that two

notorious underworld criminals wanted by police in connection with several criminal activities had returned to the country to do political work for an unnamed politician in the Sirisena-UNP government and they had been the target of the shooting. Characteristically, NYT and other media that misreported the shooting did not make a correction.

Minister Mangala Samaraweera's false "coup" accusation – Page 75



"Initially, Rajapaksa [sic]gained praise for quickly conceding defeat; however, the narrative changed in the days following the election. A controversy appeared to be brewing over claims that Rajapaksa was prepared to carry out a military coup, if he was denied another term in office at the polls.

While Rajapaksa's inner circle have [sic]said the suggestion he wanted to use to military to hold onto power were baseless, a presidential aid [sic], Mangala Samaraweera, insisted otherwise. At a public press conference, he said, "People think it was a peaceful transition. It was anything but."

"According to Samaraweera, President Rajapaksa had urged security leadership of the military and police forces to help him stay in power. Samaraweera explained that Rajapaksa "stepped down only when the army chief and the police inspector general refused to go along with him."

"It should be noted that the new government of Sri Lanka made it clear that they would investigate the allegations of an attempted coup by Rajapaksa."

Our Comment

Mr. Mangala Samaraweera has gained notoriety for making unsubstantiated accusations against his political opponents. This is one example. While police reportedly questioned several persons, including the former Defense Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa and Army Commander Lt. Gen. Daya Ratnayake, no charges were ever filed. On March 24, 2015, a government minister (Rajitha Senaratne) was quoted as saying there was no evidence of a coup. CountryWatch, updated in 2017, has failed to make the necessary correction to its narrative.

Reference to US Peace Corps -Page 143

“The US Peace Corps volunteers conduct programs in Sri Lanka ...”

Our Comment

As an American publication, CountryWatch should know better. The Peace Corps has not been permitted to conduct programs in Sri Lanka since 1998, with the exception of post-tsunami volunteering in 2005. The Peace Corps has worked in Sri Lanka intermittently (1962–1964, 1967–1970, 1983–1998).

Calling the LTTE War for a Separate State a “Civil War” – several pages throughout document

Our Comment

CountryWatch’s characterization of the violent campaign waged by Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for a separate state as a “civil war” – which it does a total of 39 times — is totally erroneous. A civil war is a war between citizens or organized groups within the same country. The Sri Lanka government deployed its security forces to stop violence by a terrorist group, which was targeting security forces as well as unarmed civilians. It must also be noted that throughout period, Tamils, many fleeing from the north, continued to live in the predominantly Sinhalese south. The LTTE has been on the US State Department’s list of foreign terrorist organizations since 1997.

Reference to the 2002 ceasefire agreement – several pages throughout document

“A 2002 truce was aimed at ending decades of violence, however, peace talks since then largely stalled. In fact, from 2005 to 2009, violence had increased despite the 2002 ceasefire agreement. In 2006, international peace brokers and the United Nations urged both sides to return to peace negotiations. By 2007, analysts warned that the country was sliding into a renewed state of civil war.”

Our Comment

CountryWatch blames “both sides” for the failed peace agreement. In reality, for the LTTE, designated a terrorist group by the US and others, it was windfall. It used the peacetime restraint by the armed forces to build up its arsenal of weapons in violation of the ceasefire. Using the free access provided by the agreement, LTTE intelligence and hit squads penetrated government-controlled areas and carried out several high profile assassinations, including Lakshman Kadirgamar, Foreign Minister, Lt. Gen. Parami Kulatunga, Deputy Chief of Staff of the Army, Maj. Muthalif, of Army Intelligence, Lt. Col. T. Rizvi Meedin, senior Military Intelligence official, and several undercover operatives. Over the five years of the agreement, the Sri Lankan

Monitoring Mission found the LTTE to be guilty of 3,830 violations and the Sri Lankan government of merely a tenth of that – 351 violations.

Statement that the SL government rejected LTTE's "unilateral ceasefire" – Page 83

"Under severe pressure, the Tamil Tigers' declared a unilateral ceasefire in April 2009 but this move was rejected by the Sri Lankan government, which was intent on its mission to bring the militant separatist movement to an end."

Our Comment

From 1985 to 2006 the Govt of Sri Lanka conducted talks with the LTTE to reach a peace agreement, initially under the guidance of India and the Norway and the international community. On all occasions from 1985 to 2006 it was the intransigence of the LTTE which scuttled the peace efforts.

The government's hand was forced when the LTTE blocked the sluice gates of Mavil Aru preventing 15,000 farmers getting water in government-controlled area. The LTTE's brazen act was also contrary to the agreed conditions at the talks conducted by Norway led peace initiative.

Sri Lanka's crime rate – page 147

"Sri Lanka has a rising crime rate. Incidences including theft, assault, kidnapping, and credit card fraud are more common after the December 2004 tsunami. Both petty and violent crimes are on the rise as well."

Our Comment

The sweeping reference to "a rising crime rate" fails to tell us if the rate has been higher every year over the prior year. As importantly, data sources are not provided.

Reference to "War Crimes" Video – Page 144

Referencing an unnamed video, Countrywatch says: "In May 2011, videotaped footage of the execution of prisoners in Sri Lanka raised questions about human right abuses at the close of that country's civil war that lasted more than 25 years. The videotaped footage showed Tamil prisoners bound and blindfolded as they were shot to death, execution-style. There were also scenes showing the abuse of corpses and the sexual assault of women. These actions appeared to have occurred in the last days of Sri Lanka's civil war as the military carried out an offensive against the Tamil Tigers."

"After technical and forensic teams examined the footage for authenticity, the United Nations' independent investigator on extrajudicial killings, Christof Heyns, concluded that the video offered sufficient evidence to open a war crimes case against Sri Lanka. In an interview with the Associated Press, Heyns said, "It's very rare that you have actual footage of people being killed." He

characterized the video as follows: "This is trophy footage." Heyns also affirmed his view that there was a strong case for the prosecution, given the footage showing "definitive war crimes." For its part, Sri Lanka has denied that any such crimes were committed and said that the video was fake."

Our Comment

While there's no reference to the video's source, we assume it's the one by Channel 4, a British television station with serious credibility issues. It must be noted that Channel 4's reputation as an objective and independent news source has been seriously compromised. The station has been accused of "knowingly complicit in promoting a narrative that was necessarily one-sided" in regards to its video on the Syrian war situation. It is also being called the propaganda platform for the UK in light of its "fake news" reporting on the controversial "White Helmets" group.

Further reading on Channel 4's lack of credibility.

How We Were Misled About Syria: Channel 4 News

FAKE NEWS WEEK: Why Channel 4 "News" Owes an Apology to Syria

In the case of the Sri Lankan video, again, Channel 4 has clearly doctored footage to promote the narrative being pushed by the British government. Its authenticity and objectivity have been challenged by several experts, foremost among them Dr. Siri Hewavitharana, an internationally renowned expert in broadcast, satellite, Internet Protocol television (IPTV) based in Sydney, Australia.

Below are excerpts from an interview of with Dr. Hewavitharana conducted by the Sunday Observer's Shanika Sriyananda (2009) which dispute Channel 4.

Q: The first Ch4 video was disputed by you claiming that it was doctored and done by an amateur. Do you say that the second video too was doctored by an amateur?

A: There is no second video as such. What they have done is, they have created a new video clip with the insertion of the previous video to give the impression that the latest video clip is the second part of the first video clip.

While trying to create this diabolical forgery they got caught – some high quality video and audio frames sequences are out of order. Even a person with a basic knowledge of video functioning can see a mis-match in the scenes and luminance in the previous video footage and the new video footage. They do not match each other.

Q: How do you dispute it this time as it was tested by three US forensic experts, who endorsed it was authentic?

A: Let's take this part carefully. No expert can say it is authentic since initial analysis by US personnel said there is a 17 frame anomaly (which comes from editing and trying to create a new wrapper from high quality video to mobile video transfer).

They also said the date does not match, indicating that the video was done after the war.

Therefore, anyone who says it is authentic, is either a liar or an incompetent person.

We also got a new specialist called Grant and he says the video is edited and time does not match and that the video uses Optical Zoom.

Therefore, why do we say this is authentic? Grant's conclusions match with original conclusion and present analysis that says the same. i.e. the video is edited, came from a video camera and dates do not match.

Q: It was alleged that the uniformed men shown in the video belong to the Sri Lankan military and they are accused of extra-judicial killings. Do you have proof to say that these scenes were fake?

A: So far no one said that conclusively and faces cannot be seen in the video. It is also quite possible that this is the LTTE executing Sri Lankan soldiers and this is a known fact.

It is also known that the LTTE used Army uniforms. The only way to prove that the video is accurate is using faces and places, so that we can authenticate.

Channel 4 highlighted the need for an investigation for war crimes on the following grounds: the executioners were in Sri Lankan army uniform; and they spoke Sinhala.

It forgot the fact that this was the most ruthless terrorist organization in the world – banned in its own country and the whole civilised world – which was prepared to send pregnant women and teenagers on suicide missions without any hesitation.

So, the attempted portrayal of the tendency of such an outfit to respect conventions – violating the dress code of a conventional army – is something for a good laugh, not to for serious debate.

Q: Was the video recorded on a mobile phone and later edited with technological adjustments?

A: Yes, it is blatantly obvious. This video is also using different video footage as seen in the video but they are trying to show it came from one video which is not the case.

The worst fact is that the optical zoom can be clearly seen indicating that this came from a video camera with Optical zoom capability and not from a mobile camera, since Nokia or similar mobile cameras do not have optical zoom capability but only digital zoom capability.

The other fact is that we cannot see any digital zoom artefacts on this video. Mobile phones only have digital zoom capability and not the optical facility.

This also give some clues since mobile phones have 3GPP format; I was involved with global Broadcast R&G for almost 25 years and Channel 4 used to have good people; it has gone in for gutter journalism in recent years.

Any sensible broadcast engineer should have picked up the lack of cascading errors on the video, since Channel 4 has used Flash format on their web site.

Q: Grant Fredericks, the US based video expert appointed by the UN's Rapporteur Christof Heyns, says the video was edited using Philips editing software. Your comments?

A: I suspect he used an AVID broadcast editor to analyse the video which is the proper thing to do.

Channel 4 got AVID editors but they never use it knowing that if they do they will be legally answerable. This shows the entire agenda of Channel 4. Grant Fredericks is the only person who is honest in saying the true facts as he has seen.

Previous experts are either incompetent or dishonest and one of them now is backtracking after Grant's summary.

I also think initially the US video expert is not an expert, as he has no basic qualifications on video design and he comes from a CCTV background with experience in subjective video process.

This explains his lack of technical know-how. I am surprised that the UN hired such a low level operator who we call "cowboys" in the industry. Knowing the former Rapporteur's lack of respect for due process, it is not a surprise at all.

Q: How do you describe the difference between the two videos, which you claim are fake?

A: We can see it on "the editor". We can check the video sequence, audio sync, luminance levels. This is what high quality broadcast editors do. We also make movies using the same editor.

Q: Do you think the second video film, which lasts for more than one hour shown at the UNHRC sessions recently, has more horrific footage than the previous?

A: It is a show piece from interested parties. Channel 4 is bankrupt and asking for funding from ITN. They have decided to use a controversial topic to get more advertising.

So the bottom line is that Channel 4 is "open to hire" even by terrorists. Knowing the UK's past history this is not a surprise.

It is ironic that terrorists use Channel 4 to blow things out of proportion. In the UK, Channel 4 is called as "King of Trash".

Q: However international experts say that the video has no signs of manipulation. What is your comment?

A: You are not an expert if you lie for monetary gains and hide obvious technical facts. Look what happened with Iraq and WDM.

The UN's own specialist (Grant) says it is manipulated, so what else do you need? Also remember that a court of law only accepts technical integrity as evidence and cannot use subjective analysis without verifying the technical part.

Q: For the second time, as you claim, Channel 4 has aired a fake video, which is misleading the international community and also tarnishing Sri Lanka's image. Is there a facility under international law to take action against forgery?

A: There are two forms of action that we can take against them.

One is to approach Ofcom in the UK to make a complaint through the Sri Lankan government or take Channel 4 to court. Channel 4 says the video cannot be verified and this is how they get away with it legally.

Q: The last time you mentioned about using advanced technology like Motion Vector (VMC) verification and cascading effect verification to use against forgery. Did you use that system this time around to prove the video is a fake?

A: Yes. The second video is of high quality and did not come from a mobile phone source.

Q: If you sum up the entire issue in two episodes, what is your conclusion on this video?

A: Channel 4 is being used by interested parties with an ugly agenda against the Sri Lankan government.

Interested parties want friction between communities so that they can use the conflict for their own agenda.

Q: Do you recommend the government to initiate a probe into the video?

A: The government should not waste time with forgeries.

If anyone has serious complaints against Sri Lanka, then they should volunteer the evidence either direct or via a third party to the government.

This is the proper process. Why should a sovereign government that battled 30 years with a ruthless terrorist outfit apologise? The Tamil and Sinhalese people need space and time to heal.

The government should actively encourage industries and developments in the North and the East and look after all the people as Sri Lankans.