

## “UN must stand up to intimidation”: Edward Mortimer

By [Laura Hughes](#), Editor (2012/13)

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An internal UN report has revealed it failed in its mandate to protect civilians in the last months of Sri Lanka’s bloody civil war. *Nouse* talks to Edward Mortimer, the chair of the Sri Lanka campaign for peace and justice and Senior Programme Adviser of the Salzburg Global Seminar. Edward was chief speechwriter and director of communications for UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan until 2006.

The UN internal review panel has said: “Events in Sri Lanka mark a grave failure of the UN to adequately respond... during the final stages of the conflict and its aftermath, to the detriment of hundreds of thousands of civilians.”

*What should the UN be doing in response to this internal review?*

“It must apply the lessons of this report. Staff in the field must be trained to stand up to government intimidation, and senior staff at HQ must understand that their most important job is to support staff in the field who are subjected to same. Maybe one or two heads need to roll to make sure the lesson is not forgotten. But let’s not talk as if the UN were just the Secretariat. Where were the member states in all this? In the Security Council, deafeningly silent. In the Human Rights Council, actually congratulating the Government of Sri Lanka on its victory, and brushing aside the very pertinent observations of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights on the terrible, illegal methods by which this victory was secured.

*What should be the response of the international community?*

“Let them not just indulge in another bout of UN-bashing. Let them focus on the real culprits in this affair – the Government of Sri Lanka, and also the leadership of the Tamil Tigers – and insist on a full international investigation of the crimes committed by both. And let them not lose sight of the appalling human rights situation that still prevails in Sri Lanka, or the creeping dictatorship that the President and his brothers are imposing on their fellow-countrymen – Sinhalese as well as Tamil – with the help of China and the complaisance of the other great powers, regional and global.”

*What is the current situation for journalists in Sri Lanka?*

“The press in Sri Lanka is less and less free. In fact it’s the fourth most dangerous country in the world in which to be a journalist, according to Reporters Sans Frontieres. This because journalists who annoy powerful people are constantly being kidnapped, beaten up, killed – or just “disappear”, picked up by a white van with no number plates. For many examples see the book “The Cage” by Gordon Weiss, former UN spokesman in Sri Lanka who resigned in 2009 because he was ashamed of the UN’s unwillingness to tell the world the horrible truth about what was happening there. A group close to the government has just acquired control of the one weekly that had still dared to be critical – the one whose Editor, Lasantha Wickrematunga, wrote his own obituary, knowing how likely he was to be assassinated, and sure enough he was (in Jan 2009). And, surprise surprise, his successor Frederica Jansz has now been sacked.”



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