

The story behind the scoops

By ANTHONY DAVID

There is always a story behind a story on reports appearing in the news columns of the Sunday Times.

Another abortive attempt to deny a Sunday Times report was made when we exclusively reported on December 19, 2010 that construction of all new buildings in the North and East under donor-funded loan or grant projects coming under the Ministry of Economic Development had been stopped from December 9, 2010

Exclusive revelations bring to the public domain what has remained in secrecy. That educates the reading public. Often, there are also attempts to challenge accounts on the grounds that they are inaccurate.

This is when there is acute discomfort or embarrassment for those related to the report.

In a bid to still "cover up" matters, they bombard the News Desk with "clarifications" or denials. If the aim of the exercise, in their perspective, is to do "damage control," often it has boomeranged on them.

One such instance came after the Sunday Times reported exclusively that a Sri Lanka delegation which held talks in New York with United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon also, met with his three-member panel probing accountability issues over alleged war crimes in Sri Lanka.

This was against the backdrop of the Sri Lankan government repeatedly stating that it would not accept the panel or its findings which was dubbed as the 'Darusman' report.

The Sunday Times revealed exclusively on March 6, 2011 that the delegation comprised then Attorney General Mohan Peiris, then External Affairs Ministry Secretary late Romesh Jayasinghe, Sri Lanka's United Nations Permanent Representative Palitha Kohona and his deputy, Major General Shavendra de Silva.

The Sunday Times report said:

"A Sri Lanka delegation, which held talks in New York with United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon also, met with his three-member panel probing accountability issues over alleged war crimes in Sri Lanka.

"The Sunday Times learns that the meeting took place on Wednesday (February 23) soon after the four-member delegation called on UNSG Ban Ki-moon at his temporary office on the third floor of UN headquarters. His 38th floor office is now under renovation".

Both, the Sri Lankan government and the UN kept the meeting a secret.

As Sri Lanka continued to maintain silence about the meeting, scepticism about the Sunday Times report was building.

The 'Inner City Press' which closely follows and reports about developments in the UN followed it up at a press conference given by the UN spokesman.

Matthew Russell Lee of the Inner City Press raised the question from the UN Secretary General's spokesman Martin Nesirky.

But, the 'Inner City Press' Correspondent



The Sunday Times revealed exclusively on March 6, 2011 that a Sri Lankan delegation met UNSG Ban Ki-moon and his officials while the government publicly held the position that it would not accept his panel or its findings, known as the 'Darusman' report.

failed to draw a response from the UN spokesman.

Three weeks later on March 27, the Sunday Times published a report re-confirming our own news story.

This was after the issue about the Sri Lankan delegation meeting with the UN panel was raised in the National Assembly in South Africa.

South Africa's Deputy President, Kgalema Motlanthe responding to a question raised by S.J. Nijekalana of the African National Congress confirmed that a Sri Lanka delegation met the three-member United Nations Panel probing alleged war crimes issues in Sri Lanka.

"As of March this year, we are aware that a Sri Lankan government delegation met with the UN panel in New York," he told the National Assembly.

There was more confirmation about the meeting. This time in the UN Panel report itself.

A letter written by Dr. Palitha Kohona to Lyn Pascoe, UN Under Secretary-General for Political Affairs, listed as an annexure to the Panel report confirms this.

This is what Dr. Kohona said in a letter dated February 16, 2011, "I refer to your letter of 14th February and I am pleased to advise that a high level Sri Lankan delegation will be in New York on 22nd and 23rd February. Further to the discussion your office had with my authorities in Colombo, I would be grateful if you would suggest times for this delegation to meet with senior Secretariat staff along with members of the Panel on 22nd and with only senior Secretariat staff on the 23rd. I am also attaching copies of communications addressed to the Executive

Office of the Secretary General by my authorities."

Thus the Sunday Times exclusive report was proved right.

Another abortive attempt to deny a Sunday Times report was made when we exclusively reported on December 19, 2010 that construction of all new buildings in the North and East under donor-funded loan or grant projects coming under the Ministry of Economic Development had been stopped from December 9, 2010.

The report said Economic Development Minister Basil Rajapaksa, who oversees the larger volume of development projects in the once war-torn provinces, has directed that priority should be given to renovation and reconstruction of existing buildings.

The report said all line ministries and government officials in the two provinces had been informed of the decision.

Two separate denials were issued by the government. One from Professor Ariyaratne Athugala, Director General of the Government Department of Information. The second was from Professor Sunanda Madduma Bandara, Director General (Development and Communication) of the Ministry of Economic Development.

But, the following week the Sunday Times was not only able to stand by the story it reported, but also reproduce the circular which had been issued in this regard.

The report was adjudged the 'Scoop of the Year' by a panel of judges for the Editors' Guild and Sri Lanka Press Institute Awards last year.