

The Observer under investigation for breach of accurate reporting on Iran

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Campaign Against Sanctions and Military Intervention in Iran (CASMII), UK Press Release

The Press Complaint Commission in the UK have launched an investigation into the complaint brought against the Observer newspaper by Campaign Against Sanctions and Military Intervention in Iran (CASMII), for The Observer's breach of the journalistic codes of Accuracy and Opportunity to Reply in its reporting on Iran.

On June 10, the Sunday Observer published a front page story, entitled "MI6 probes UK link to nuclear trade with Iran". (1) The story alleged the discovery by the MI6 and the Customs and Excise of a nuclear conspiracy in which highly enriched uranium from Russia was transhipped through Sudan "destined" for Iran, suspected for use in Iran's "nuclear weapons programme."

There were references throughout the article to claims of anonymous "investigators" without any supporting evidence or attempt to substantiate these allegations. There was also open reference to "Iran's nuclear weapons programme" which is significant in the absence of any such claim or evidence from the IAEA inspectors. There was a recent precedence to this by another incriminating story (2) in the Guardian, 22 May, by Simon Tisdall, which accused Iran of a "Secret Plan for Summer Offensive to Force US out of Iraq", again using an unnamed US official as evidence.

Mehrnaz Shahabi of CASMII UK said today:

"This absence of care in journalistic duty is particularly significant because not only does it resonate very closely with the propaganda that paved the way to the 2003 illegal invasion of Iraq and its tragic human consequences, but it highlights an intensification of the war propaganda against Iran and the emergence of a dangerous shift, in that, now it is the mainstream liberal press such as the Guardian and the Observer, who enjoy a fair degree of respect and trust even amongst the anti-war readership, which seem to have been employed to disseminate Pentagon's agenda."

The Campaign Against Sanctions and Military Intervention In Iran (CASMII) wrote (3) to the Observer on 13th June outlining these concerns and requested a reply. This case was also reported to the Press Complaint Commission for investigation into the origins of this irresponsible piece of journalism. The Observer's Readers' Editor, Stephen Pritchard, in the Observer 17 June replied to a "flood" of emails, "accusing it of, for instance, printing

'distortions' against Iran 'similar to the reports in 2003 that paved the way to the bloodbath in Iraq - nearly all of which are now discredited'. Mr Pritchard who made a specific reference to the letter from the Campaign Against Sanctions and Military Intervention in Iran, claimed that the Observer had been "unfairly vilified" (4).

The Press Complaint Commission enquired from CASMII whether it still wished to pursue the complaint. On 26th June CASMII wrote to the Observer (5) and to the Press Complaint Commission, explaining why it was crucial that the matter is investigated. It requested a public acknowledgement from the Observer and the publication of CASMII's reply, either by publishing the two letters or an opportunity to put its position regarding the Iranian nuclear issue across in the form of a comment or an article in the Observer. CASMII also requested that, in light of the allegations made in the Observer story about "Iran's nuclear weapons programme", the Observer publish a fact-sheet regarding Iran's nuclear programme, this time using the IAEA as the source. There has been no reply from the Observer.

The Press Complaint Commission has subsequently written to CASMII indicating that after the above preliminary enquiries, CASMII's complaint about the Observer will be investigated.

1. http://observer.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,,2099634,00.html
2. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Iraq/Story/0,,2085192,00.html>
3. http://www.campaigniran.org/casmii/files/070626_letter_to_the_observer.pdf
4. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/story/0,,2105069,00.html>
5. http://www.campaigniran.org/casmii/files/070613_complaint_to_the_observer.pdf

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