

The UN and General Mood's "Missing Report" on Conflicting Accounts of Houla Massacre

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This is an updated and edited excerpt from a talk I gave in Beijing in July 2012 at a program sponsored by April Media.

The Houla massacre occurred in Syria on May 25, 2012.

This was but a few days before Kofi Annan, who was at the time the joint Arab League-UN envoy, was scheduled to visit Syria.

Immediately after the massacre, there was a media campaign in much of the western media to blame the Syrian government for the deaths. There were 108 deaths reported which included men, women and children. A short time after the massacre, an alternative account was made available by a Russian online media group, Anna News.(1) The day following the massacre, a news team for this online site visited the area where the massacre had occurred. Their report appeared on a number of alternative news sites soon after the massacre.

The reports from the Anna News team, and other netizen news reports, challenged the mainstream western media claims that the Syrian government was responsible for the killings.

Similarly, the Syrian government conducted a preliminary investigation. They provided witnesses that the massacre was carried out by armed insurgents and criminal elements.

The mainstream western media accounts of the massacre (and some Arab satellite tv channels) have mainly presented what they claim is happening from the point of view of the armed opposition in Syria. The armed opposition's account of events demonizes the Syrian government and campaigns for foreign intervention. There have been a number of instances when the accounts from the armed opposition have been shown to be false.

Differing from the reports in the mainstream western media is information presented by the Syrian government. Also there is the information in the alternative media that I refer to as netizen journalism. Netizen journalism exposes distortions and misrepresentations in the news coverage provided by the mainstream western media, and does the investigation required to present an accurate narrative. For example, in the aftermath of the Houla massacre, a number of articles documenting the role of the armed insurgents in carrying out the Houla massacre appeared on alternative media sites. Similarly there were articles comparing what had happened in Houla with media campaigns advocating foreign

intervention in the Yugoslavian conflict in the 1990s. Also there were articles considering what the motive was behind the massacre and the clues this provided toward determining who was responsible.

I want to propose that this form of alternative media is setting up a communication channel different from that of the mainstream western media.

What has been interesting has been to not only consider the two different channels that these different forms of news represent, but also to look at how different actors at the UN relate to these different communication channels.

In April, the UN Security Council authorized a mission of 300 unarmed observers to monitor what was happening in Syria and to try to encourage a cease fire between the conflicting parties. This mission was called the UN Supervisory Mission in Syria (UNSMIS). When the Houla massacre first occurred, UNSMIS observers went to investigate the massacre. The initial response of UNSMIS was that there were two views of what had occurred and who was responsible presented to them. UNSMIS said it was not yet possible to make a determination which was accurate and which was a falsification.

In June, responding to the request from the UN Security Council in the press statement issued after the Houla massacre that UNSMIS do an investigation,(2) Major General Robert Mood, the commander of UNSMIS told journalists that a report had been prepared and submitted to UN headquarters.

In the article "General Mood: 'Two Versions' of the Houla Massacre," John Rosenthal writes, "At the June 15 press conference General Mood went on to say that the mission had assembled a report about the massacre, including the details of witness interviews and that this report had been submitted to UN headquarters in New York. This raises an obvious question," writes Rosenthal, "Why has this report not been rendered public?"(3) Rosenthal does a service pointing to General Mood's June 15 press conference in Damascus. The press conference is online only in a video format. I have transcribed the part of the press conference where General Mood talks about the report on the Houla massacre that he says was given to UN headquarters.(4)

Describing the investigation by UNSMIS into the Houla massacre and the report UNSMIS submitted to UN headquarters, General Mood tells journalists:

"The statement we issued after el Houla is still valid.

Which means we have been there with an investigating team.

We have interviews, interviewed locals with one story, and we have interviewed locals that has another story.

The circumstances leading up to el Houla and the detailed circumstances, the facts related to the incident itself, still remains unclear to us.

We have put this together, the facts that we (can) could establish by what we saw on the ground. We have put together the statements, the witness interviews and we have sent that as a report to UN headquarters, New York.

And then the assessment on what's the way forward. Will there be a different investigation?

(This-ed) is a matter for headquarters in this context. But if we are asked, obviously we are on the ground, and could help facilitate that.”

According to General Mood’s statement during this press conference, UNSMIS provided UN headquarters with a report on the Houla massacre. This report included the facts on the ground that UNSMIS was able to establish, and also witness statements and interviews from “locals with one story” and from “locals that has another story.” This report, according to General Mood, was not able to establish “the circumstances leading up to el Houla, and the detailed circumstances, the facts related to the incident itself,” as these still remained “unclear” to UNSMIS.

But General Mood explained that if there was to be “a different investigation,” UNSMIS was “on the ground and could facilitate that.”

UN Security Council members have said that the Security Council did not receive the report nor does it appear that there was general knowledge at the Security Council that this report presented two conflicting accounts of what happened and that UNSMIS, which was on the ground in Syria at the time, was able to help conduct a more expansive investigation to determine who was responsible for the massacre.

The question is raised as to why the UN Secretariat did not make the UNSMIS report available to the Security Council? Why didn’t the UN pursue the course of a further investigation into the circumstances leading up to the Houla massacre and the facts related to the incident itself by taking up the offer that General Mood made to facilitate such an investigation?

When journalists asked the Secretary-General’s spokesperson what happened to Mood’s report and why it wasn’t given to the Security Council, the spokesman told the press the report had been given to various members of the UN Secretariat. But as several people at the UN and online have asked, “Why not to the Security Council?”

One of the original purposes for the UNSMIS mission, according to Kofi Annan, was “to see what is going on” so as to be able to “change the dynamics.”(5)

This past April, outlining the need for UNSMIS, Annan said, “We continue to be hampered by the lack of verified information in assessing the situation....We need eyes and ears on the ground. This will provide the incontrovertible basis the international community needs to act in an effective and unified manner, increasing the momentum for a cessation of violence to be implemented by all sides.” This “eyes and ears on the ground” function was to be filled by UNSMIS. UNSMIS was deployed to Syria and was on the ground at the time of the Houla Massacre and was able to do an investigation.

Yet when UNSMIS submitted a report to UN headquarters documenting its investigation, it was withheld from the Security Council. Though Ban Ki-moon’s spokesperson acknowledged that the report was received, the report was not given to the Security Council. It was not made available to the media and the public. Thus it could not be part of the “eyes and ears on the ground” that Annan said was needed. One can only wonder about the fact that shortly after this report was received by the Secretariat, General Mood left UNSMIS, and not long after that, UNSMIS was ended. The UNSMIS report on Houla did not blame the Syrian government for the massacre, but instead presented two conflicting views of the massacre and offered to facilitate a further investigation.

At least some Security Council members indicated that they wanted the kind of information General Mood explained was in his report. For example, on June 4, at a press conference to mark the beginning of the Chinese Presidency of the Security Council for the month of June 2012, China's Ambassador Li Baodong, referring to the Houla massacre, said (6):

"Now we have different stories from different angles. Now we have the story from the Syrian government, and from the opposition parties, and from different sources." Since the Security Council "has a team...on the ground," he said referring to UNSMIS, "We want to see first-hand information from our own people." He hoped this would make it possible to put the different pieces of information together and to come "to our own conclusion with our own judgment."

The acknowledgement by China's UN Ambassador that there were different views of what had happened in the Houla massacre and that there was a need to get accurate information from an on the ground investigation was an important step for a member of the Security Council to make. This challenged mainstream media claims that their account was the only account of what was happening in Syria. The UNSMIS report was the kind of additional information the Chinese Ambassador indicated he was seeking.

The fact remains, however, that the report from UNSMIS that General Mood presented to Ban Ki-moon's UN headquarters was withheld from the Security Council, the press and the public. Instead of the UNSMIS report, and any in-depth independent investigation conducted by the UN, which General Mood said UNSMIS could facilitate, on August 3, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution condemning the government of Syria for the violence in Syria. In his speech in support of the resolution, Abdallah Y Al-Mouallini, the Ambassador representing Saudi Arabia at the UN, blamed the Syrian government for the Houla massacre.

Similarly, in August, the Human Rights Council issued a report blaming the Syrian government for the violence in Syria, with no effort to reconcile the conflicting facts or interviews submitted by UNSMIS to the UN, nor any effort to take up the offer made by General Mood that UNSMIS would provide on the ground assistance to do the needed investigation. The report of the Human Rights Council inaccurately claimed that(7):

"The lack of access significantly hampered the commission's ability to fulfill its mandate. Its access to Government officials and to members of the armed and security forces was negligible. Importantly, victims and witnesses inside the country could not be interviewed in person."

Such a statement by the Human Rights Council misrepresented the fact that indeed the UN had had observers on the ground in Syria, and that those observers not only gave a report to the UN, but also said that they could facilitate a more thorough investigation if the UN desired to do so. Hence the claims of the Human Rights Council that the UN was unable to conduct an investigation are contrary to General Mood's statement to the press.

Then in August the Security Council, without being able to review the UNSMIS report or to consider the need for the additional investigation that General Mood said was possible in order to determine who was responsible for the Houla massacre, allowed the mandate authorizing UNSMIS to expire. Though there was an effort by some on the Council to introduce a resolution to extend UNSMIS, others on the Council refused to do so unless Syria was penalized, even though the issue of who was responsible for the violence against civilians, as had happened at Houla, had not been determined by the Security Council nor

by any other UN body through an UNSMIS facilitated and impartial investigation.

Commenting on the Security Council action withdrawing UNSMIS from Syria, Archbishop Mario Zenari, the Vatican Nuncio to Syria, said that the withdrawal of UN forces from Syria was “a sad blow. Three or four months ago, there was a good bit of hope for their mission, and now their departure plunges us back into this reality....”(8)

His disappointment is understandable. If the Annan plan was based on having “eyes and ears on the ground” as a way to discourage violence against civilians, the failure of the UN to make the UNSMIS report on Houla available to the Security Council and to the public, and to recognize the need for a more extensive pursuit of the facts of what happened in Houla, was a failure dooming the Annan mission in Syria.

Commenting on what she referred to as “fake” news reports about what is happening in Syria, Mother Agnes Mariam of the Cross, a Superior of the community at the monastery of St James the Mutilated in Qara, Syria, explained that the news reports were “forged with only one side emphasized.”(9) In her comments to the Irish Times, she included a criticism of UN reports that she said, were “one sided and not worthy of that organization.” Though she didn’t specify any particular reports, one would not be surprised if it were particularly the Human Rights Council Report she had in mind.

In a paper titled, “The Role of Netizen Journalism in the Media War at the United Nations” presented in July at the International Relations and Political Science Conference in Beijing, I documented more of the particularities of netizen journalism in the media war at the UN over Syria. (10) There have been many articles and videos posted on a number of web sites challenging the western mainstream media version of the events in Houla and providing facts that make a convincing case that the massacre was carried out by armed insurgents and local criminals.

With these articles acting as a catalyst, the mainstream German newspaper, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung published two articles documenting how the armed insurgency was responsible for the Houla massacre. The titles of the articles translated into English were “Syrian Rebels Committed Houla Massacre” and “On the Houla Massacre: The Extermination”.

In my paper on “The Role of Netizen Journalism in the Media War at the UN,” I also consider the netizen journalism coverage of two other examples of conflicts that were under consideration by the Security Council and consider the impact on the Security Council of the netizen journalism on these issues.

II- Conclusion

The problem raised by this preliminary presentation concerns the importance of facilitating an accurate channel of communication about the conflicts under consideration by the Security Council.

In the example of the Syrian conflict, the fact that General Mood’s report on the Houla massacre could be withheld from the Security Council, and UNSMIS ended by the UN Security Council without any consideration of the issues raised by the report, represents a serious dilemma. This indicates that there is a problem with the communication channels at the UN. There is a problem with the integrity of these communication channels. This is an

example of what happens when a communication channel can be blocked.

In a press conference held in March of 2011 when China assumed the month long rotating Security Council presidency, Ambassador Li Baodong referred to the international media as the “16th member of the Security Council.”(11)

While Ambassador Li Baodong was then referring to the mainstream media, it is important to recognize that there is a new form of journalism emerging. This new form of journalism is being created by netizens dedicated to doing the research and analysis to expose the interests and actions that are too often hidden from view in the reporting of the news. As a result of the failure at the UN to provide the Security Council with the conflicting facts of the UNSMIS investigation and to take up the UNSMIS offer to help carry out a more substantial investigation on the ground, an impartial investigation, the ability of the Security Council, and ultimately the UN, to determine what is an accurate narrative about the Houla massacre has been blocked.

Such a failure demonstrates ever more urgently the need to uncover the actual forces at work, the interests being served, and what is at stake in the events that make up the news.

This situation demonstrates in a graphic manner, the need for a netizen journalism that can help to create a channel for communication to provide a more accurate understanding of the conflicts the Security Council is considering. Such a journalism can help to make more likely the peaceful resolution of these conflicts.

Notes

(1) Anna News- Houla Report

Early reports were on Syrianews.cc but later many alternative web sites carried Anna Reports

Following is one url for an early report:

<http://www.syrianews.cc/syria-what-really-happened-in-al-hula-homs/>

(2) Security Council Press Statement on Attacks in Syria, May 27, 2012

“Those responsible for acts of violence must be held accountable. The members of the Security Council requested the Secretary-General, with the involvement of UNSMIS [United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria], to continue to investigate these attacks and report the findings to the Security Council.”

<http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2012/sc10658.doc.htm>

(3) John Rosenthal, “General Mood: ‘Two Versions’ of the Houla Massacre”The Western media was quick to blame Assad. But does an unpublished UN report tell a different story?”, June 26, 2012.

Rosenthal writes: “What is perhaps most remarkable about General Mood’s comments is that they have been almost universally ignored — and this despite the fact that the video of the press conference has been made publicly available by UNSMIS on the mission’s own.”

<http://pjmedia.com/blog/general-mood-two-versions-of-the-houla-massacre/>

(4) June 15, 2012, General Mood Press Conference, Video part 2

The section where General Mood describes the UNSMIS report on Houla starts at min: 3:10 to 4:17

(5) See Kofi Annan tells UN “We Need Eyes and Ears on the Ground”, April 26, 2012

<http://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2012/04/26/kofi-annan-briefing/>

(6) Video of Li Baodong press conference marking the Chinese Presidency of Security Council for the month of June 2012. June 4, 2012.

<http://www.unmultimedia.org/tv/webcast/2012/06/li-baodong-china-president-of-the-security-council-on-the-programme-of-work-for-the-month-of-june-2012-press-conference.html>

(7) Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria. Human Rights Council, August 15, 2012.

<http://un-report.blogspot.com/2012/08/report-of-independent-international.html#more>

(8) Cindy Wooden and Sarah MacDonald, “Nuncio in Syria: People stunned...worried for the future”, The Tidings, 24 August 2012.

<http://www.the-tidings.com/index.php/news/newsworld/2548-nuncio-in-syria-people-stunned-worried-for-the-future>

(9) Patsy McGarry, Media “Coverage of Syria violence partial and untrue, says nun,” The Irish times, Monday Aug 13, 2012, <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/world/2012/0813/1224322099930.html>

(10) “The Role of Netizen Journalism in the Media War at the UN”
Draft Paper:

<http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/beijing2012/r-china2012-paper.doc>

Talk:

<http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/beijing2012/r-china2012-talk.doc>

(11) Press Conference: Li Baodong (China) President of the Security Council for the month of March, 2 March 2011.

<http://www.unmultimedia.org/tv/webcast/2011/03/press-conference-li-baodong-china-president-of-the-security-council-for-the-month-of-march.html>

Note: A version of this article appears on my netizenblog:

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