

The United Nations and the Houla Massacre: The Information Battlefield

By [Ronda Hauben](#)

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At a press conference held on June 4 marking the beginning of China's presidency of the UN Security Council for the month of June, Li Baodong, China's Ambassador to the UN, observed that there are different versions of the facts of the Houla Massacre. "Now we have different stories from different angles," he noted. "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, "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." (1)

The expectation was that Joint UN-Arab League Envoy Kofi Annan would be able to provide further information from the UNSMIS Observer mission when he came to speak with the Security Council on Thursday, June 7. It was anticipated that Annan's presentation would help to clarify the facts of the massacre. (2)

On June 7, however, instead of providing new information from such an investigation, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and several of the other speakers at the Informal General Assembly (GA) meeting put the responsibility for the Houla Massacre on the Assad government. This was also the dominant response of the nations that spoke at the Informal GA meeting even though there had not yet been any adequate investigation into facts of the situation. (3) Also, there were claims of a new massacre.

Some of the member nations that spoke at the Informal GA meeting, however, objected to coming to such a conclusion, especially, in the absence of an adequate investigation.

In his comments referring to the massacres in Houla and on the outskirts of Hama, the Russian Ambassador to the UN, Vitaly Churkin, said, "Clearly these are the most serious crimes that require a reliable detailed investigation."

Other nations including Venezuela, India, Cuba and Nicaragua expressed similar views. The Venezuelan Representative told the Informal GA meeting, "We suspect the fact that these criminal acts happen to coincide with these debates at the UN. We have to wonder to whom does this benefit at this time?" He urged that, "an independent and transparent investigation into these massacres must take place and we must find convincing clarity."

India's Ambassador to the UN, Hardeep Singh Puri, noted that the attacks against civilians

and security forces in Syria “have intensified over the last few weeks and have taken a significant toll.” Also he drew attention to the sharp increase in the number of terrorist attacks in different parts of the country.” He “condemned all violence, irrespective of who the perpetrators are,” and called for the “cessation of all outside support for armed groups and serious action against the terrorist groups in Syria.” And he asked that the crimes, “including the recent incident in El Houleh, are fully investigated and their perpetrators brought to justice.”

After comparing what has happened in Syria with what had happened in Libya, the Nicaraguan Representative called for “an exhaustive investigation of these crimes and to bring the guilty to justice.”

The Cuban Ambassador noted that the “information is fragmented, imprecise and the object of frequent manipulation.” He denounced what he saw as the “complicity of the major broadcast media which are used to confusing reality and not accepting the responsibility for their acts.”

During his comments, which were twice cut off by the UN video transmission system, Ambassador Bashir Ja’afari, the Syrian Ambassador, asked how the Secretary General of the League of Arab States could render a judgment about who is responsible for the Houla massacre when such a judgment contradicts the report of the United Nations observers on the ground, and investigations of that atrocious massacre have not yet been completed. The massacre, he emphasized, had been condemned by the Syrian government.

Ambassador Ja’afari announced that, “Syria is ready to receive a commission of inquiry of states known for their independence and for their respect for the UN charter and for their refusal to interfere in Syrian internal affairs.”

Later in the afternoon, after the Security Council’s informal briefing with Kofi Annan, there was a media stakeout at the Security Council. One journalist asked Ban Ki moon, “Mr. Secretary General, what steps have you taken to comply with the request of the Security Council on 27th of May through the press statement to investigate fully, independently and transparently the killing in El Houleh?” The UN Secretary General did not answer the question. (4)

It is notable that as Ambassador Li Baodong had recognized during his press conference on June 4, several different narratives have been used to describe the Houla massacre. These offer different explanations of the circumstances under which it happened and therefore what the implications are for the future of the Kofi Annan 6 point peace plan.

Those nations encouraging an investigation into the details of the Houla massacre want to determine the lessons from it toward solving the crisis in Syria. Those who were quick to jump to conclusions based on superficial information are helping to fan the flames of the conflict.

What are these major competing narratives?

Western and Arab Media Narrative

The narrative that is being spread by much of the mainstream western and Arab satellite media is a narrative that blames the Assad government for the Houla massacre. At first that media claimed that the people killed, including the women and children, had been killed by

shelling from Syrian troops attacking the town.

In examining the videos and photos put online or provided by the opposition making these claims, however, it became evident that many of the victims, particularly the women and children, had been killed at close range by bullets and knives and not by the shelling of heavy weapons by the Syrian military.

It soon became obvious that only 20 of the 108 who were killed may have been killed in combat fighting over the checkpoint and that the circumstances of these deaths were not yet determined.

The opposition and the western and Arab media supporting the opposition, like BBC and Aljazeera, etc. had to quickly change their narrative. They invented a new force allegedly used by the Syrian government, the shabbiya, which they claimed is a pro government militia. (5) The shabbiya allegedly came into the homes of people and killed them at close range.

Russian News Team Narrative

A Russian news team interviewed people after the massacre. The explanation compiled from these interviews represents a very different narrative.

Their account noted that Houla is an administrative area, made up of three villages. It is not the name of a town. Some of this area had been under control of armed insurgents for a number of weeks. The Syrian army maintained certain checkpoints. This account explains that on the evening of May 24, the Free Syrian Army launched an operation to take control of the checkpoints, bringing 600-800 armed insurgents from different areas.

At the same time that there was the fight over the checkpoints, several armed insurgents went into certain homes and massacred the members of several families. Among the families targeted was a family related to a recently elected People's Assembly representative. This family and another family that were killed were said to be families that supported the Syrian government. "Other victims included the family of two journalists for Top News and New Orient Express, press agencies associated with Voltaire Network," reports the news and analysis site Voltairenet.(6)

Template for Media Warfare

At a press conference held in Damascus shortly after the Houla massacre by Joint UN-Arab League envoy Kofi Annan, a question was asked which provides an important context to keep in mind when trying to determine what happened in Houla.

The journalist asked: I am a Russian living in Syria and reporting for various Russian online sites. What is happening in Syria reminds me of what happened in Yugoslavia that led to its division. We have sources that tell us that the Pentagon is preparing for war. If that happens, what do we do? What do Syrians do and what does the Government do? (7)

Annan's response was that he had no information of the Pentagon "preparing for war." Nor did he have any indication that what was happening in Syria would be a repeat of "what happened in Yugoslavia." Despite the fact that Annan dismissed the journalist's question, the question provides an important perspective toward understanding what is happening in

Syria.

Looking back at the form of media warfare used to prepare public opinion for the NATO aggression against the former Yugoslavia, a template emerges that reflects a pattern in these events.

In this media warfare, the mainstream western media was used to spread stories about the alleged “responsibility for” massacres in order to demonize certain forces. This demonization served to justify the NATO bombing of their country. Hence the Russian journalist’s question to Kofi Annan raised an important and serious concern.

In his book “Liar’s Poker”, which analyzes the role of the media in the Yugoslav war, Michel Collon writes “Information is already a battlefield, which is part of war.” He writes that in 1991 the Slovenian government created a “media center which unleashed a flood of disinformation to international correspondents.” (8) This disinformation created a false narrative about what was happening and about who was responsible for the violent acts that killed many innocent people. The false narrative was then used to provide the justification for foreign intervention on one side of the conflict.

Also Collon documents the use of US public relations agencies to help mold public opinion in favor of the Croatian and Muslim nationalists and as media warfare against the Serbs. In a striking way, Collon shows how “a massacre happens unexpectedly each time certain Western powers plan to escalate measures against the Serbs.”(9) He proposes what could be considered as the template used to create the climate of public opinion justifying the escalation of the attack on Yugoslavia.

Here are the components of the template he presents(10):

- Step 1: Preparation of a more or less hidden agenda
- Step 2: Images that shock Public Opinion
- Step 3: Groundless and Wild Media Accusations Without Investigation
- Step 4: Western Objectives are Achieved
- Step 5: Corrections to Erroneous News Reporting: Too Late and No Impact

Collon argues that shocking events were “staged” for the international media so as to make possible a planned escalation of the attack on Serbia. The Houla massacre bears a striking resemblance to the incidents that Collon refers to in the 1990s that set a basis for the escalation of the aggression against the Serbian government.

Is this current rush to judgment, both at the UN, and in the mainstream western and Arab media but another example of support and encouragement for armed aggression against a sovereign nation, as in the Yugoslavian situation? Is it but a signal to the armed insurgents willing to carry out horrific deeds to achieve their goal of foreign intervention, that they should go ahead with their cruel agenda? These are questions that need to be asked as they may help to explain the underlying motives of one of the narratives.

The failure of mainstream western and Arab satellite media and of a number of nations at the UN to acknowledge that there are different views of the underlying cause and implementation of the Houla massacre impedes the urgency with which the needed investigation and analysis are to be organized.(11) Such an investigation is critical to identify the actual problems and to understand what is needed to solve them.

It is important to acknowledge that there are two major narratives about the events of the Houla massacre. Such an acknowledgment recognizes, as Ambassador Li Baodong did, the need for evidence to determine what is an accurate narrative of the Houla Massacre. There are a number of blogs and news sites on the Internet where netizens contribute articles and comments that are helpful toward analyzing what is happening in Syria and at the UN and whether the actions at the UN are helpful or harmful for resolving the crisis in a way that is in line with the principles of the UN charter. There are examples of a substantial new netizen journalism developing on the Internet which is taking up the needed work to investigate the facts of the Syrian conflict so as to understand what is needed to contribute to a peaceful resolution.(12)

Notes

(1) Video of Press Conference marking the beginning of the Chinese presidency of the Security Council for the month of June.

<http://webtv.un.org/meetings-events/security-council/watch/li-baodong-china-president-of-the-security-council-on-the-programme-of-work-for-the-month-of-june-2012-press-conference/1672822951001>

(2) The press statement issued by the UN Security Council on May 27 called for the Secretary General and UNSMIS “to continue to investigate these attacks and report the findings to the Security Council.”

(3) See for example the summary by Moon of Alabama, <http://www.moonofalabama.org/2012/06/the-syria-discussion-at-the-un-general-assembly.html>

(4) “Joint press encounter with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, Kofi A. Annan, Joint UN-Arab League Special Envoy on Syria and Nabil El-Araby, Secretary General of the League of Arab States.”

(5) See for example the account by AP: “The assault came nearly a week after 108 people, many of them women and children, were killed in the area. Activists said government forces first shelled the area on Friday, then pro-regime fighters known as shabiha stormed the villages. The Syrian government denied its troops were behind the killings and blamed ‘armed terrorists’.”

<http://calgary.ctv.ca/servlet/an/local/CTVNews/20120531/UN-chief-warns-syria-houla-120531/20120531/?hub=CalgaryHome>

(6) See for example: Thierry Meyssan, “The Houla Affair Highlights Western Intelligence Gap in Syria”,

<http://www.voltairenet.org/The-Houla-affair-highlights>

See also: Wassim Raad, “The Set Up Massacre and the American Fingerprint”

<http://www.voltairenet.org/The-set-up-massacre-and-the>

In German see for example Mathias Broeckers, “Der Hula-Hoax”

<http://www.broeckers.com/2012/06/05/der-hula-hoax/>

and Rainer Hermann, "Abermals Massaker in Syrien" in Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, June 7, 2012.

<http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/neue-erkenntnisse-zu-getoeteten-von-hula-abermals-massaker-in-syrien-11776496.html>

(An English translation FAZ is available at Moon of Alabama blog:

<http://www.moonofalabama.org/2012/06/prime-german-paper-syrian-rebels-committed-houla-massacre.html>)

(7) Transcript of JSE Press Conference in Damascus, 29 May 2012, p. 4. For video see: <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/unsmis/>

(8) Michel Collon, *Liar's Poker*, International Action Center, New York, 2002 p. 45. (This is an English translation of the book which was originally published in French.)

(9) Ibid., p. 28

(10) Ibid., p. 26.

(11) The Human Rights Council has passed a resolution calling for an investigation into the Houla Massacre. Several sources, however, document that the Human Rights Council only considers information supplied by activists in support of the armed opposition. See for example "UN Commissions report on Houla? But they only talk to Syrian opposition – by phone", May 31, 2012

"Anti-war campaigner Marinella Correggia worries the HR commissioner talks only to its sources: the opposition."

<http://www.rt.com/news/houla-massacre-un-syria-635/>

(12) A few of the English language web sites providing news and analysis of the Syrian conflict toward a directed peaceful resolution include:

Moon of Alabama

<http://www.moonofalabama.org/>

Centre for Research on Globalization

<http://www.globalresearch.ca/>

VoltaireNet

<http://www.voltairenet.org/en>

Syria News

<http://www.syrianews.cc/>

Syria360

<http://syria360.wordpress.com/>

The 4th Media

<http://www.4thmedia.org/>

*A version of this article appears on my netizenblog:
<http://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2012/06/12/un-and-houla-massacre/>*

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