

Ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka 'can be resolved'

THOSE who followed Sri Lankan diplomat Jayantha Dhanapala's stewardship of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Review conference a decade ago remember the droll wit he brought to the tense negotiations.

One session, in 1995, began two hours late because of frenetic backroom consultations. Some of the tension eased when Mr Dhanapala emerged to apologise for the delay.

"Consultations apart, we also commenced a little after 'High Noon' to intensify the drama of the occasion," he said.

The reference was to the 1952 Western classic of that title in which the town marshal, played by Gary Cooper, wipes out his enemies with little help from the scared townsfolk.

A wry sense of humour is a very Sri Lankan attribute.

Visitors to the teardrop-shaped island often marvel at how a nation that has been riven by Tamil-Sinhala ethnic strife for three decades still manages to keep a smile on its face.

More than 65,000 Sri Lankans have died in the war. A ceasefire between the government and the main Tamil group, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), has been in place for four years but has proved brittle lately.

A Sri Lankan major-general was assassinated recently by a Tamil Tiger suicide bomber. Last year, the Tigers killed Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar at his home.

Mr Dhanapala headed his country's secretariat that coordinates the peace talks until last November, when he turned to concentrate on his UN candidature.

But he said he had not given up hope for peace in his country.

"We need to rectify the mistakes of the past," he said. "But it is not a hopeless situation; no situation is ever hopeless."

The Arab-Israeli conflict has gone on for even longer. Pakistan's dispute with India over Kashmir also has been a prolonged one. The Northern Ireland agreement has yet to be fully implemented.

"We need to have both parties back at the negotiating table. It is clear the President of Sri Lanka is prepared to go the extra mile," said Mr Dhanapala, who is from the majority ethnic Sinhalese community.

On July 10, Sri Lanka said it would begin holding meetings to discuss constitutional reform in an effort to end the war.

The current non-federal Constitution gives little power to the northern and eastern provinces, home to most Tamils. The majority Sinhalese dominate Sri Lanka's south.

The meetings will bring together the Sinhalese, the tiny Muslim minority, Tamil parties that oppose the Tigers and a 15-person committee of experts.

After fighting for an independent Tamil nation for many years, the Tigers have recently appeared to suggest that they may settle for regional autonomy.

Mr Dhanapala said President Mahinda Rajapakse's strategy is to build a consensus in the south so that there will be no resistance to an eventual settlement.

"It is clear the President is ready to grant maximum devolution within a united Sri Lanka. It is now for the negotiators to arrive at an acceptable package. The Indian model is the one closest to hand," he said.