



tv supplement

PROTECTING OUR COUNTRY IMAGE

Jayantha Dhanapala says diplomacy, not emotion, is the answer to the row over the UN's HR panel and the GSP-Plus impasse.

Former diplomat and one time contender for the UN's top job Jayantha Dhanapala watched in dismay as the theatrics unfolded in front of the UN compound in Colombo not long ago. On the eve of the suspension of the lucrative GSP-Plus concession by the EU, a Cabinet minister was fasting unto death in protest at the UN Secretary-General's appointment of a three-member panel to investigate alleged war crimes in Sri Lanka.

Public opinion was divided between those who viewed the protest as a democratic right and others who worried that Sri Lanka was yet again in the news for the wrong reasons. "It was really an incitement to the general public, a kind of demagoguery that whips up emotions," says Dhanapala.

The former UN Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs believes a less extreme method should have been deployed to mark the country's protest. "I feel that the Government and the Sri Lankan people in general have reacted very emotionally... We have an excellent External Affairs Minister, and to support him there is a very able team. There is a great deal of talent in the diplomatic service; and if a coordinated effort was made by the minister and the diplomatic missions, we could have handled this in a much more positive and constructive way," he maintains.

With sections of the Government and the populace anxious to write the war into history and get on with the job of establishing that elusive Sri Lankan identity, outbursts against the international community have become commonplace. The recurring complaint is that the UN and the West are meddling in Sri Lanka's internal affairs.

But due to the very fact that Sri Lanka is a member of the UN and a signatory to mandatory declarations, sovereignty is hardly an absolute value, Dhanapala contends. He explains that "non-interference in the internal affairs of countries and sovereignty are vital principles in the charter of the UN. But we concede sovereignty every time we sign a treaty. Every time we sign a hu-

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man-rights treaty, we give other countries the right to look at our record on human rights and question it."

"The Government was perfectly right in refusing to let others interfere in its internal affairs; but at the same time, human rights are a legitimate concern for the international community. Unfortunately, whether we like it or not, human rights and international humanitarian law matter a great deal," he adds.

And he warns against further inflammatory action, observing that "fireworks and harsh words" can only hurt our national image and prospects. "We have to recognise from a purely pragmatic sense that our tourists come largely from the West, that our trade – especially our garment trade – is largely with the West, and a lot of our aid and investment also come from the West," Dhanapala surmises.

And a fair treatment of the West is in keeping with Sri Lanka's foreign policy, he stresses, pointing out that "the fundamental policy we have followed for many decades is a non-aligned policy, and that non-aligned policy predicated an equality of treatment to all countries". While at the same time, Sri Lanka can have legitimate differences with Western countries, they must be pursued through diplomatic channels, he urges.

And what of the citizenry's right to protest? "As a democracy, we do value the right to a peaceful protest; but as you know, we obstructed the UN staff from coming in or going out, and that is a violation of an agreement that we have with the UN to allow them to work here, in the development of our own country," Dhanapala affirms.

It is a blemish on the country's image, he feels, adding in conclusion that he fears a repetition of the same knee-jerk reaction in response to international conundrums in the future. He says candidly: "Although assurances were given that it will not be repeated, I cannot be certain myself that in the exigencies of circumstance or because of political expediency, something might not happen again which may cause a repetition of this."

AUDIENCE: Principally, the business and professional communities in Sri Lanka. Target viewership includes TNL's million-plus viewers, LBN's Bloomberg viewership and LMD's 40,000 readership.

DURATION: 30 minutes.

Weekly, every Sunday (at noon and at 9.05 p.m.) on TNL channel (including DialogTV and LBN).
Weekly, every Monday (at 10 p.m.) on LBN cable TV (Bloomberg Television). Also on SLT's peoTV.