

Interview with a diplomat

The Ubysey catches up with the head of the United Nations disarmament affairs department

by Eric Szeto

NEWS WRITER

From being a Sri Lankan diplomat to being head of the United Nations (UN) disarmament affairs department, Jayantha Dhanapala has seen more than most people will ever see in a lifetime.

After five years working at the UN, Dhanapala's done a little of everything. Delegating with former Iraqi leaders, advising Hans Blix before he went to inspect Iraq—that's just a typical day at the office.



DHANAPALA

But the world is an unstable place, Dhanapala explains from a well-positioned office inside UBC's Liu Institute for Global Issues. The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, small arms and conventional weapons means uncertainty looms.

"Today military expenditure is over \$800 billion per year. For every person in the world, we are spending \$128 per annum: he says disapprovingly. "There are over 3 million people living on under \$1 per day. This is a gross disparity between the expenditure on arms and what is being spent on people:

He elaborates: "With agricultural subsidies in the [European Union] alone, the result is \$2 a day for cows, so this is the kind of anomaly and the inequities of the international system that have to be dealt with."

But the news is not all dire. Dhanapala gives credit to Canada for its efforts in contributing to the mine-ban treaty and also Canada's role in helping form the International Criminal Courts.

"Mine-ban is one of the great achievements and Canada is to be complimented as being the *van gaarde* along with Norway in achieving that landmark convention: applauds Dhanapala.

"The UN does not have the luxury of pursuing national interests like countries because we have 191 countries—an entire constituency," he says. "We have to try to blend the national interests of all countries, a very difficult challenge, but at the same time we must have a cooperative and common structure and to advocate that"

Since bullets began flying in Iraq, many have compared the failings of the UN to the former League of Nations, which failed to prevent the Second World War—something Dhanapala is quick to refute.

"First, I think the UN is indispensable, there's no question...there are fundamental differences between the League of Nations and the UN," says an adamant Dhanapala. "The League of Nations suffered from the absence of the US, but also being far too idealistic in achieving its goals. But the UN family has done enormous good. Look at the World Health Organisation and the elimination of small pox, what the UN has done for women's rights, for AIDS. This makes it very clear that the UN has had enormous achievements, not counting the peacekeeping effort"

This list of accomplishments often does not make headlines, he says. "What happens, unfortunately, is the mass media highlights the failures of the UN in certain specific cases and anything else is forgotten easily."

But the diplomat admits that international law does have its weaknesses.

"Frankly, if countries want to break international law, there is nothing that can prevent them to—except international public opinion," he says. "If one of the five permanent members of the Security Council commits a major violation of human rights or international law, I cannot see there being an agreement in the security council because there will be a veto of one of the five countries. So there is this imbalance, which unfortunately we have to live with:

But Dhanapala does add, "Security Council reform is very much on the agenda. It's been on the agenda for a very long time:

Right now, there are three ways countries can be convinced to follow international law, he says.

"Since the mine-ban convention there has been a substantial reduction in the use of landmines, in the sport, in the manufacture of land mines and we have to thank the mine-ban convention for having made that great step forward in eliminating that destructive force," he says.

But then there is the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Dhanapala says hypocrisy exists in countries that advocate disarmament while possessing nuclear weapons themselves.

"How can you have two standards?" he questions. "One standard for non-nuclear weapon states and one for yourself? It's a kind of apartheid, so there is always going to be this tension and unless you have nuclear disarmament and nuclear non-proliferation at the same time, going hand in hand, focusing on nuclear proliferation alone is not deemed credible:

And Dhanapala would know. While working for the Foreign Service in Sri Lanka, he represented his country at the 1995 Nuclear Proliferation Treaty UN extension conference. He then became the ambassador to the US. Shortly after, UN Secretary Genral Kofi Annan offered him a position in the newly reestablished UN department of disarmament affairs.

And then there is the troubles of the UN. Trying to get such a diverse spectrum of differing opinions to cooperate can be tougher than drawing a political map of the former Soviet Union from memory.

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**-Jayantha Dhanapala
UN official**

"First and foremost, public opinion must be much more vocal and much more forceful. Secondly, we need to, on the part of leadership, have a great compliance with international treaties and international law. Thirdly, now with the international criminal court, comes the concept of individual culpability."

And you can be sure Dhanapala will keep all of these initiatives on his radar screen in the future.

"He really works at making the way he works and his work is making the world a more peaceful place, harmonious and consistent: explains Jonathan Granoff, president of the Global Security Institute, who's known Dhanapala for years.

"He walks the talk."