

Ambassador Jayantha Dhanapala

Dhanapala: U.N. in need of reform

By **SUSAN DUNCAN**
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He grew up in a couple of small towns in the hill country of Sri Lanka, this man who would become a statesman and travel the world on behalf of his native land. And it is in these tight-knit communities nestled in nature's beauty where Jayantha Dhanapala stitched together his moral fiber.

"It is in small communities where you find solid values in which a country must finally rest," said Dhanapala on Monday, the final day of his visit to Effingham.

The Sri Lankan ambassador to the United States spent three days here. On Saturday he addressed a Sri Lankan group of expatriates known as Save Our Sri Lanka before resting and doing a little site-seeing Sunday. He spoke with civic and business leaders Monday to encourage investment in his island nation, then headed to the University of Illinois and, eventually, Chicago.

Effingham, similar in size and community spirit to the towns he grew up in, left the diplomat longing for home. His trip here also reinforced to Dhanapala his belief in the importance of providing adequate infrastructure so that people might remain in the countryside as opposed to congregating in urban sprawls.

"At the Habitat II conference in Istanbul we discussed megacities, an increasingly dominant feature

as we enter the 21st century," recalled Dhanapala. He expressed several concerns over such urban centers, saying they are places where crime thrives, city resources are strained, human contact is depersonalized and respect for people as human beings is diminished.

Dhanapala has a long history of service to his country. Prior to accepting the ambassador post to the United States in January 1995, he served as assistant foreign secretary in the Sri Lankan government. He previously has been assigned to embassies in London, Beijing and New Delhi, and for five years he directed the U.N. Institute for Disarmament Research.

Dhanapala gained international accolades after he orchestrated the extension of the Nuclear Arms Nonproliferation Treaty in May 1995. The New York Times confirmed just Saturday he is one of a handful of candidates being considered to guide the United Nations as its next secretary-general.

Humbled by the suggestion that he might be the right person to lead the 186-member United Nations, Dhanapala acknowledges that the U.N., after 50 years of existence, is not perfect. It is in need of self-analysis and reform, he said.

"It can be done with prudent management," said Dhanapala.

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"You must cut the coat from the cloth you have: you cannot do more than you have resources to do."

The global role of the United Nations is being questioned by some in the United States, which finds its forces part of U.N. peacekeeping troops in the hotbed of Bosnia and previously Somalia. Dhanapala, however, states unequivocally that the U.N. charter clearly gives the organization a peacekeeping role.

"With the Cold War situation, the U.N. was not able to fully function," he said of the group of nations enjoined to "rid the world of the scourge of global war."

The ambassador noted a mood of euphoria about what the United Nations could accomplish following the Cold War, but that hope must be blended with a certain amount of realism, he said.

"The U.N. can do only what its member states agree it can do - no more, no less," said Dhanapala, who believes in the saying that "nothing is possible' without men, but nothing is lasting without institutions."

The ambassador has observed a change over the years in U.S. isolationism. When he first came to the United States as a student in 1957, he sat in a classroom as the teacher asked other students if they knew where Ceylon was. "There was pin-drop silence," he recalled. The U.S., he says, is, now more engaged in events in the rest of the world.

Educated in schools in London, America and Sri Lanka, the diplomat believes in the value of education.

"Education liberates people," said Dhanapala, himself the son

of a teacher. "It makes you aware of the choices before you."

Dhanapala cautioned, however, that there is a downside to developing societies focusing on education without focusing on economic development. It is, he says, a recipe for disaster. When job opportunities could

not keep pace with a wealth of human resources in Sri Lanka, the accompanying frustration led to youth uprisings in 1971 and again in the late '80s.

Many of the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam) rebels now propagating violence in Sri Lanka are an outgrowth of those uprisings. Dhanapala is hopeful the violence in his homeland will subside.

"There comes a time in any terrorist movement where you have to decide your future role, and make the transition from naked terrorism to political negotiation," he said.

Dhanapala and his wife, Maureen, will one day return to live in their beloved Sri Lanka. He grew up in a family of 11: she was an only child. Together, they share two children. Daughter Kiran is married and lives in the capital of Colombo where, as a trained economist, she serves as a consultant on development issues. Son Sivanka is a lawyer working with the U.N. high commission on refugees. He presently is working in Bosnia, and prior to that served in the same capacity in Cambodia.

Dhanapala believes there is a strength drawn from being in your own traditional environment.

"There is great joy in being nourished' by your roots."