

“Sri Lanka's best-known diplomat eyes the UN”

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**You so admire the late Chilean poet-diplomat Pablo Neruda. But Neruda said in his Memoirs that 'a man should live in his own country'. Why do you want to live in New York as UN Secretary-General?**

True, I admire Neruda, but you can carry your country inside you. Neruda himself served as a diplomat in this part of the world. Like a tortoise carrying its shell I carry my cultural roots with me.

**You announced your candidacy very early. That is a bit unconventional, isn't it?**

Dr Surakiart (Sathirathai) of Thailand was the first to announce his candidacy. My government told me in mid-2004 to be Sri Lanka's candidate. It was only at the end of 2004 that I consented. But it was, yes, rather premature. It is important to make a distinction between the era when Dag Hammarskjold was drafted by the international community and the current era. You cannot have wallflowers any longer. You have to actively want the job. Sri Lanka has the ideal profile to provide a candidate.

**How do you rate your chances?**

Governments traditionally do not make formal announcements at this early stage. I think it is prudent for countries to consider all their options closer to the time when the Security Council and General Assembly are called to make their decision. I have from all countries an acknowledgement of my qualifications and expertise.

**India has unexpectedly put up a candidate. In fact, Dr Shashi Tharoor speaks of you with high regard. Has his nomination complicated things?**

I reciprocate Dr Tharoor's regard for me. We have been friends and colleagues in the UN. India's decision did not come as a complete surprise. But it flies in the face of established tradition that no large country, with the kind of external involvements that India has, submits a candidate. However good a diplomat you are, there could always be a perception of conflict of interests. Sri Lanka has no territorial disputes with any country. The appearance of an Indian candidate does not cause complications. It may produce other candidates, as from Pakistan.

**People remember your humour when you chaired the Nuclear Non-proliferation Review conference. That said, many non-nuclear states thought you were too kind to the nuclear-armed powers then.**

A president of any conference can only act in consonance with the participants. The situation in the NPT Review was that countries that wanted an indefinite extension (of the treaty) had an overwhelming majority. The letter of the treaty required only a majority. In

my judgment, it would have been unwise to have a vote in which the supporters of that position, including the US, France and Britain, Russia and China, wanted an indefinite extension. What I sought to do was to accommodate the concerns of the non-nuclear weapons states for a push towards nuclear disarmament by incorporating it in the statement of objectives and benchmarks. I wasn't trying to accommodate the nuclear weapons states.

**How do you assess Mr Kofi Annan's tenure as UN Sec-Gen?**

His first term was an outstanding success, crowned with the Nobel Peace Prize. However, there have been problems in the second term, arising largely from Iraq. Also evidence of a degree of mismanagement of the UN itself. Kofi Annan's personal integrity is unquestioned.

**You are a former undersecretary-general. How can an insider reform the UN?**

First, in a career spanning about 40 years, I served in the UN for 10. I presided over the NPT Review conference as a Sri Lankan ambassador, not as a UN official. Second, being neither a total insider nor an outsider, I have a blend of experience and understanding of the UN to implement reform.

**What are the areas that require the most reform?**

First, institutional reform, as with obsolete organisations like the Trusteeship Council. There are dysfunctional institutions like the former Commission of Human Rights. There is need for innovation in institutions like the Peace Building Commission, which fulfils a genuine need. Then you have the mandates, usually in the form of resolutions. But there is a third category, secretariat reform. This is not unusual. The European Commission not long ago had to go through sweeping reform.

**If elected, what would be the top items on your agenda?**

Clearly, reform of the organisation must come right on top. But we are reforming with clear objectives. The achievements of the Millennium Development Goals would be one of the priorities.

**Can the UN sec-gen function independently at a time when the US is so assertive?**

I think he can. The secretary-general is seen as a moral compass. Of course he has to be tactful and diplomatic but he also must be courageous and forthright when it comes to standing by the UN's fundamental values.

**As a China expert, how do you read the current US-China relationship?**

I served in China during a vastly different period - the Cultural Revolution. The dramatic emergence of China as an economic power through peaceful means is something to be

admired. I believe there is every effort being made to ensure that the political repercussions of this are peacefully accommodated in the global power system. There are no major conflicts between the US and China and efforts are being made, now that China is also in the World Trade Organisation, to make sure any disputes are resolved peacefully. Not only China, India is also a major economic power. We need to see the Group of Eight accommodate these two countries in the same way Russia has been accommodated. A more broad-based acknowledgment of the realities of power would help the global system.

### **Should India be accommodated in the Security Council?**

The Security Council today is widely seen as unrepresentative of current realities. While all of us acknowledge there should be reform of the Council, and enlargement is only one aspect of reform I may add, there is no consensus as to how that reform should take place. We need to work harder for a scenario acceptable to all.

### **As adviser to Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse, you directed the peace process with the Tamil Tigers. How do you read the situation at home?**

There have been blatant violations of the ceasefire by the LTTE. We need to have both parties back at the negotiating table. The President is prepared to go the extra mile. If you look around, you will see many terrorist groups have come into the democratic mainstream, the most recent being Nepal's Maoists. It is a tragedy that the LTTE does not make the same transition. 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 and has been advocated by various groups, including the democratic leadership of the Tamils. There could be other solutions as well. But very generous packages in the past have unfortunately been rejected by the LTTE.

### **It has been 30 years since LTTE chief Prabhakaran assassinated Jaffna mayor Duriappah and sowed the seeds for the Tamil uprising. Are you giving up hope?**

Absolutely not. Every conflict has its own dynamics. Some take longer to resolve. We have the Arab-Israeli conflict going on for a long time. We have the Kashmir problem, problems in Colombia, even in Northern Ireland. No situation is ever hopeless. (But) we need to rectify the political mistakes of the past.

### **Does Colombo have any new ideas?**

It's a collective effort. The President has appointed a committee of legal experts, he has had several rounds of all-party talks, there have been previous rebel groups that have come into the mainstream. The same is true of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front) that conducted two insurgencies in the south.

I believe this concept of maximum devolution, within the framework of an undivided Sri Lanka without attaching labels such as unitary or federal to it, would be a very pragmatic approach.

**The Tigers have asked for India to mediate. What do you think?**

India has been actively involved in the Sri Lanka situation for a very long time. Fifty million Tamils live in Tamil Nadu. Earlier Indian efforts culminated in the 1987 Indo-Lanka peace accord following which we had actual involvement of Indian peacekeeping force here. There is no gainsaying that India is still a very important influence. Colombo has always welcomed an Indian role in the peace process.

**Are you planning to visit South-east Asia?**

No. With the Asean pledge of support to one of their nationals, it seems a bit churlish to canvass support for myself there. This is a very friendly and healthy competition.

**In other words, this game is played more in the spirit of cricket rather than rugby, your favourite game?**

(Laughing) I play both games. Rugby also can be played with the rules being observed and without anything untoward happening. Or in an unsportsmanlike manner.

**To take you back to Neruda. Which is your favourite Neruda poem?**

The Heights of Macchu Picchu, probably.

**Biography**

Mr Jayantha Dhanapala, 67, is married, and has a son and a daughter. He has a BA from Sri Lanka's University of Peradeniya (1961) and an MA in International Studies from the American University of Washington DC (1976). He studied Chinese at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London (1966-67). He entered the Sri Lankan foreign service in 1965 and has served in Beijing, London, Washington, New Delhi and Geneva. In 1995, he was president of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty Review and Extension Conference. Between 1998 and 2003, he served as the UN's undersecretary-general for disarmament. Appointed senior adviser to Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse in December last year. From June 2004 to November 2005, he was secretary-general of the Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process with LTTE.