

"Development Will Help Prevent Conflict"

IPS Columnist Service

COLOMBO, Sep (IPS)--Jayantha Dhanapala, the nominee of the Sri Lankan government for the post of UN Secretary General, is currently the senior advisor to the president of Sri Lanka. He has also been the head of the Sri Lankan government's peace secretariat. His career in the private sector, government, diplomacy, and the UN spans over 30 years. Secretary-General Kofi Annan hand-picked Dhanapala as Under Secretary-General to re-establish the Department of Disarmament after the UN reforms of 1997.

Excerpts from an interview

How should the UN be restructured to meet the needs of the 21st century? What is your vision of a future UN?

The UN must be transformed into a more supple body that can act speedily, transparently, efficiently, and with accountability in addressing global issues. There cannot be another Rwanda, another Srebrenica or - to cite more recent examples - another Darfur or another Lebanon. My vision of the UN is one that inspires confidence and hope in the remotest villages and crowded slums of the world not as a global gendarme but as an action-oriented care-giver drawing on all the resources of governments, the private sector, and civil society.

What difference does your coming from Asia make as a leader of the UN?

An Asian Secretary-General -- and especially one from a small pluralist democracy containing a rich diversity of religious and ethnic groups and carrying no accompanied baggage in terms of external disputes -- is best equipped to lead the UN in the globalised world order of today. Asia accounts for 60 percent of the world's population. The unique blend of tradition and modernity, the combination of long-term vision derived from ancient civilisations, and the pragmatic need for immediate results in a fast-changing world and the capacity and integrity to mediate between extremes to build a consensus through discussion and compromise is part of the Asian tradition which I am heir to as a Sri Lankan.

In a 192-member organisation based on the principle of one-nation, one-vote, do you think the 15 member Security Council is a political anachronism? If so how should it be revitalised and reformed to reflect the realities of today?

What is anachronistic is that the power realities of today are very different from what they were in 1945 and that the components of global power have also changed. The composition of the Security Council must therefore be changed with an expansion of numbers. There are also working procedures to be improved and made more transparent and there is a vital need for better communication between the Security Council and the General Assembly.

If elected, what would be your priorities for the UN? Would you place more emphasis on the world's social and economic problems and less on political problems?

I have consistently believed in a holistic, multi-disciplinary approach to global problems. Coming as I do from a developing country and being the son of a school teacher who grew up knowing economic hardship, I am deeply convinced that a focus on development will help expand people's choices and help bring peace and security and human rights to millions throughout the world. Development will help prevent conflict and will contribute to social justice including the achievement of gender equality.

Do you think the international community will meet the 2015 deadline for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)? If not, why not? And why is it that despite all the assistance provided by the UN over the last 60 years, it has still failed to help eradicate poverty?

The annual reports of the progress we are making on the MDGs show that, while some advances have been made, we are likely to fall behind especially in sub-Saharan African countries where the poor are getting poorer. Poverty cannot be eradicated by increased development assistance alone. While individual governments must take responsibility for failures in governance and national development strategies, natural disasters and systemic problems have also prevented us from reaching our goals, while conflicts have exacerbated poverty and displaced people. We have also not made sufficient progress in establishing the right global climate through partnerships for development with debt relief and access to markets. The failure of the Doha Development Round in the WTO is especially unfortunate. The UN must convene a major conference by 2010 to assess what we can be done collectively to ensure the achievement of the MDGs. The over one billion of my fellow human beings living on less than USD 1 per day and the 30,000 children dying every day from preventable or treatable causes are tragic realities I find unacceptable.