



tv supplement

LEARNING OUR LESSONS FROM WAR

Jayantha Dhanapala says a political solution to the 'ethnic issue' and dignified international relations are vital to our progress.

The Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) began public hearings in early August with a mandate to shed light on the long years of war in this country. But we can ill-afford to wait for the commission's findings before we begin to address the deep-seated need for reconciliation, contends former diplomat and one-time candidate for the UN's top job Jayantha Dhanapala.

He feels that while post-war recovery has seen a rapid lift-off in the north and east, we are missing a vital cog in the wheel of economic development – a political solution to the 'ethnic issue'.

"It has been a long time coming... A lot of work has been done in the east in terms of development, and a lot of work has begun in the north. A political solution is the framework within which all this economic construction should take place," says the senior diplomat.

Dhanapala believes that while the war has been won, more needs to be done to win peace – and that constitutional change is imperative. "It should be an exercise in which everybody participates. It has to be a consultative process. And we need to ensure that the 'minorities' are also brought into that process," he asserts.

Similarly, he adds, development should also adopt a participatory approach: "People in the north-east must be asked what their wishes are when we shape a development programme. I have been told that consultation has been inadequate, not sufficiently participatory, and I think that's a problem."

Dhanapala commends the UPFA Government's efforts to resettle war-displaced civilians. But he observes that while the numbers of those waiting to return to their hometowns and villages have dwindled to around 35,000 (according to Government estimates at the time of the interview), the process of resettlement could have been smoother.

"What the Government has done is in fact creditable and must be endorsed by everybody concerned. I only wish that the speed with which this was done was greater. But of course there were

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infrastructural problems and bureaucratic issues. And there are still 35,000 to be settled, that's 35,000 without homes and livelihoods."

He adds that fair treatment of NGOs working in the north will also help rebuilding efforts. While there may be some organisations below par, Dhanapala notes that "there are some very good NGOs that have done honest work for a long time", whose hard-won rapport with the community is of great value.

And the goodwill of the international community is sorely needed in propelling this country forward. Dhanapala feels that while we may very well be approaching 'Asia's Century', and despite the new alliances struck with countries such as Libya and Iran, turning our back on the West would be no different to killing the goose that lays the golden eggs.

Even countries such as India and China who are spearheading the shift in economic power away from

the US and Europe have the West firmly in their horizons, he points out.

And he explains that "militarily and industrially, there will still be important players in the West – the EU and the United States, in particular. It is in Sri Lanka's interests, certainly, that we have the locus of power moving to the East. But even with this shift, you will see that China and India look to the West for markets, and also as a source of high technology."

Given that much of our trade, aid and investment still flow from America and the Eurozone, he says we should follow the lead of the Asian 'power elites' and "make good use of the West".

He urges "less emotion and more dignity" in responding to international opinion. "The petulant reaction on our part with regard to the UN Secretary-General's appointment of an advisory panel, and other issues, has demonstrated hypersensitivity that is not very mature. Many countries have goodwill towards Sri Lanka and they're ready to assist us in our economic development, but our statements which have been intemperate in character do not help," Dhanapala concludes.

BENCHMARK'S BIG PICTURE

The business of peace, political instability, politicisation, bribery and corruption, professionalism and ethics, law and order, energy and resources, infrastructure, fiscal policies, productivity and poverty.

PROGRAMME CONTENT

The week's news and events, biz indicators, snippets and snapshots of the week as it was for business, and an issue in the spotlight (interview segment).