

**Jayantha Dhanapala, Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs at the UN**  
**Interviewed by World Goodwill, March 17, 2003**

*Jayantha Dhanapala, currently the Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs at the United Nations is a native of Sri Lanka. Between 1965 and 1997 he held diplomatic appointments in London, Beijing, New Delhi, Geneva and Washington D.C. In August of 1997 he joined the Centre for Non-proliferation Studies of the Monterey Institute of International Studies in the USA as Diplomat-in-Residence. In January 1998 he was appointed Under-Secretary General for Disarmament Affairs and at the end of February the Secretary-General appointed Mr. Dhanapala as a Commissioner in UNSCOM and the Head of the Special Group visiting the Presidential Sites in Iraq*

**WG:** We feel this is a very timely interview, and we are very glad that you have agreed to meet with us. Is there anything you would like to say by way of introduction before we begin?

**JD:** Well, I have completed five years as Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs, a position that was re-instituted by Kofi Annan as part of his reform proposals of 1997, and I am planning to relinquish duties at the end of May, so it is a good opportunity for me to have a retrospective view of the five years and also perhaps to look ahead at the situation with regard to disarmament, particularly since we seem to be on the brink of war in Iraq at the current moment. War, as the Secretary-General has said, is always a human catastrophe. It is also a failure of diplomacy, the UN being an organisation committed to eliminating the scourge of war. It is certainly not a pacifist organisation because we do have in Article 51 and in Chapter 7 [of the UN Charter], provision for the use of force in the defense of an individual country, and in the collective self-defense, both of which require the use of weapons of war. So we are not talking about a weapon-free world, or anything as utopian as that. At the same time, we are committed over a long period of time through the web of treaties and conventions that we have negotiated, to eliminating weapons of mass destruction and to regulating conventional weapons to a quantity commensurate with the legitimate self-defense needs of countries. And it is when we exceed those legitimate needs that one country's security begins to become another country's insecurity. And this is how we have problems in the international situation.

**WG:** After the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Communist Bloc in 1989 and the resultant ending of the Cold War, there was a general sense by many in the West that nuclear disarmament would be the logical next step. But as we all know, this did not happen. What do you believe went wrong?

**JD:** Indeed, there was a great sense of euphoria at the end of the Cold War. Peace was breaking out. We had anticipated a new peace dividend. Global military expenditure came down sharply and there was a new sense of unity and purpose in the Security Council with all the permanent members working together to achieve peace. However, what we saw was that as global war grew more distant there were more intra-national wars, resulting from old rivalries – some of them ethnic, some of them economic, some of them political, some of them relating to border conflicts – all emerging. And an enormous circulation of small arms and light weapons, plus conventional weaponry, fed these.

But, you ask why nuclear disarmament could not receive the impetus. And that was because, contrary to what we had all assumed was the case – that nuclear weapons were no longer a weapon of war because they could cause such indescribable destruction and horror and that they were only a political weapon to be used ostensibly for deterrence purposes – was not so. The end

of the Cold War did not result, unfortunately, in the abolition of those weapons; we had some treaties, bilateral treaties, START I and START II which were helpful, INF prior to that, helped to eliminate an entire category of nuclear-capable missiles. But we also had negative developments. The Russian Federation, having lost its superiority in conventional weapons with the United States, decided it would renounce its “no first use of nuclear weapons” pledge, and began to rely more on nuclear weapons – out of a sense of insecurity. We really did not have anything beyond START I and START II, which was a reduction in nuclear weapons, leading also to the destruction of some weapons.

I was a member of the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons and that Commission’s report remains one of the high-water marks of advocacy for nuclear disarmament. It pointed out very cogently that as long as nuclear weapon states insisted on the unique right to maintain their weapons, there would always be others who would be claiming that right for themselves because it could not be an exclusive preserve of one club of countries. So when we had, very wisely, the negotiation of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, India kept out for the reason that we saw her own desire to eventually cross the threshold – which was announced in 1998 when they exploded nuclear devices, followed by Pakistan. So we have had now the five declared nuclear states, plus India, Pakistan, and possibly Israel, which has neither confirmed nor denied that it has nuclear weapons, as being nuclear-weapon capable states.

We have also seen more recently that Iraq clandestinely developed a nuclear weapons program. The same is probably happening in North Korea, because they have withdrawn from the NPT [the Non-Proliferation Treaty], and now there are suspicions of one or two other countries being mentioned in the media, such as Iran. So all this is very depressing news because we thought we were going in the direction of the elimination of nuclear weapons.

In 1995 I had the privilege of presiding over the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Review and Extension Conference where the decision had to be taken, 25 years after the entry into force of the NPT, as to how long the Treaty was going to be extended. There were many who thought that the Treaty should be extended for short periods at a time, because of the need to keep the nuclear-weapon states under pressure to fulfill their part of the grand bargain that was negotiated in 1968.

**WG:** Wasn’t it the intent of that treaty to eliminate nuclear weapons?

**JD:** That was indeed, and it was very explicit in Article 6 of the NPT. It has been made more explicit in the Preamble of the Partial Test Ban Treaty and also most recently, in 1996 by an advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice, all of which made it abundantly clear that the intent of Article 6 was that there should be meaningful negotiations for nuclear disarmament, leading to the complete elimination of nuclear weapons. We have gone a step further--in the 2000 NPT Review Conference, there was an unequivocal undertaking on the part of the nuclear-weapon states to eliminate their nuclear weapons. So in the face of all of that, what we have been able to achieve is certainly a far cry from what was promised.

**WG:** How was it intended that the NPT would be enforced?

**JD:** Well, this is the problem with international law. There is no way in which international law can be enforced and where compliance of disarmament treaties can be ensured. This is one of the reasons why we have gotten into the situation that we have with regard to Iraq. Any breach of a treaty such as the NPT should be reported to the Security Council and, where a non nuclear-

weapons state has violated its safeguards agreement with the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency], that also can be reported to the Security Council. But there is no way you can report the five nuclear weapons states to a body where they are the five nuclear members as well as the permanent members with a veto! There is, in fact, no corresponding way in which the non-nuclear-weapons states can have redress to their grievances. But, of course, the non-nuclear-weapons states maintain collective pressure at every Review Conference of the NPT, hoping to touch the consciences of the nuclear weapons states as well as to mobilise international public opinion in the nuclear-weapons states, as well as in the rest of the world, of the need to eliminate nuclear weapons.

**WG:** I was recently reading an article by a Nobel Laureate who had worked on nuclear weapons development as well as in the field of disarmament, and he said that, in his opinion, the only way to bring about nuclear disarmament was through public opinion.

**JD:** That was Sir Joseph Rotblat, who was also a member of the Canberra Commission. Yes, Joseph Rotblat, having been on the Manhattan Project, knows more than anybody else does the horror of a nuclear weapon if it was used. And we had hoped, as I said, that we would see the gradual de-emphasis of nuclear weapons in the arsenals of major countries, because of their horrendous lethality. Instead, under the new doctrines that are now emerging, we find there are new uses being contemplated for nuclear weapons – such as Bunker Busters and miniature nuclear weapons – all of which are deeply disturbing because it's only going to give nuclear weapons a new lease on life. And if one country does it, you can be certain that there will be a domino effect and there will be another nuclear arms race, which we saw during the Cold War and which happily ended when the Cold War ended.

But today we have a new factor, which is a very, very dangerous one, and that is the threat of weapons of mass destruction being used by terrorists. We don't think that so far various groups or individual terrorists have the capacity technologically to develop a sophisticated nuclear weapon with a delivery system, but we do know that fissile material in the world has not been properly safeguarded, especially in the former Soviet Union. But elsewhere as well. And there is a grave danger that fissile material can be stolen or, in some way through a loss, be taken away and then, with a conventional explosion, it could be converted into a radiological weapon or what is called a "dirty bomb." That itself can be highly dangerous because it will disperse radioactivity which can kill hundreds of people and which will contaminate the environment around where the explosion has taken place. So we do need today to have additional efforts towards nuclear disarmament, precisely for these reasons.

**WG:** Do you see any way in which public opinion could be mobilised?

**JD:** This is one of the unfortunate developments that we have seen in the last ten years. There has been a certain complacency that has crept in. Because of the fact that the Cold War ended, we also saw the end of the kind of strong upsurge of public opinion that we saw in the period when we had a push for the elimination of nuclear weapon testing in the atmosphere, which had caused strontium 90 to get into mothers' milk and other horrors. The kind of demonstration we saw here in New York in 1982 in Central Park with a million people demonstrating against nuclear tests, that one does not hear any longer. It has been assumed that nuclear weapons are comfortably parked somewhere, out of sight and unlikely ever to be used.

But that is not the case. Because while it is true that the number of weapons have been reduced, we still have over 30,000, some of them poised on alert, to be launched on warning. We have had near-accidents on many occasions. In 1995 there was a misreading of a nuclear warhead test in Norway, which is a NATO country, and the Russian leaders had themselves very, very nervously checking on whether this was in fact a real missile coming at them until, of course, it was fortunately checked out and the danger of a Russian retaliation was averted. But we cannot always be lucky. We know from the record of what happened in the Cuban Missile Crisis because all the declassified documentation that has now come out. But again, the world was saved from Armageddon by sheer luck. *Thirteen Days* is the title of the film which was made depicting that crisis, and those thirteen days of negotiation helped us to prevent a nuclear war. We have to continue of course to hope and pray that nuclear weapons will never be used, but we cannot depend on luck all the time. And, therefore, the only way in which we can permanently eliminate the danger of nuclear weapons is to eliminate those weapons themselves.

People say that you cannot disinvent nuclear weapons. I think this is a highly disingenuous and naïve argument, because we don't need to disinvent them, but we can delegitimise them, as we have delegitimised chemical weapons through the Chemical Weapons Convention, and biological weapons through the Biological Weapons Convention. All you need to do is to have a Nuclear Weapons Convention that outlaws nuclear weapons. And when something is outlawed, and when you have tough verification, intrusive verification, as we do with the Chemical Weapons Convention, we can ensure that we will not have nuclear weapons anymore on the face of this earth. And in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the high degree of development in human civilisation, with our science progressing so far that we have mapped the human genome, that we have been able to go to the moon and explore the planetary system, that we should at this time continue to rely for security on a weapon that can blow us all up, forever and ever, is to me unconscionable and inexplicable

**WG:** So how do we solve this problem, in your opinion?

**JD:** Well, first of all I do agree that we need to educate the public once again. I don't mean it in a patronising sense. I think it is important for teachers, for experts, for research institutes to sensitise global public opinion to the dangers of nuclear weapons. This has to be done on a systematic basis. Media have a very important role in this. And then we have to continue through the existing machinery for multilateral disarmament to try to achieve the goals that we had always set ourselves. The comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty has still not come into force. It has to come into force. We cannot afford to have the current norm on nuclear testing breached in any way. We have to continue to try to bring down the level of weapons. We did have a modest success last year when the United States and the Russian Federation, the two countries which have the largest arsenals of nuclear weapons, decided to reduce over a ten year period their nuclear arsenals, which are deployed to a level of between 1700 and 2200 by 2012. But that is not a disarmament treaty per se because it does not envisage the actual destruction of any of those nuclear weapons. All that will happen is that they will be removed from a deployed status into a reserved status, to be brought back at some time. So it is not an irreversible disarmament as one would have hoped and has taken place under START I. But nevertheless it is a treaty, and we have to be grateful for small mercies.

**WG:** Do you think disarmament should come about through the auspices of an organisation such as the United Nations?

**JD:** Well, the United Nations is eminently placed to undertake negotiations and to implement nuclear disarmament treaties as well as other disarmament treaties. The very first resolution adopted in January 1946 in the UN General Assembly was on nuclear disarmament. And ever since then through resolutions, through special sessions of the General Assembly, and through the treaties that have been negotiated in UN fora, we have had a number of actions taken to achieve nuclear disarmament in particular, as well as general and complete disarmament. But what we do not rule out, of course, is bilateral negotiations as well. Because major nuclear rivals feel that they cannot undertake nuclear disarmament negotiations in public, with all the details of their nuclear arsenal being laid bare. The US and the Russian Federation, both in the past and I'm sure in the future, will want to undertake such negotiations bilaterally, which is perfectly acceptable. One would hope that the other nuclear powers--China, the United Kingdom, France, would also join at some point of time, instead of waiting until the two major nuclear weapon countries disarm.

So we have to continue to pressure these countries, use the NPT forum and the Conference on Disarmament, which has not been able to function for approximately four years because of political disagreements. All this has to be done because there is a grave danger that if we don't stop this Gadarene rush to use nuclear weapons we will have more and more proliferation. More countries will aspire to nuclear weapons because they wrongly identify nuclear weapons as a component of a power status in the world. And that is what is so unfortunate, when so much of that investment can go into productive economic and social investment.

**WG:** If there were to be a disarmament, a global disarmament, would the United Nations have to to retain nuclear capability, just in case other nations surreptitiously hid nuclear weapons?

**JD:** There was such a plan in the very early days of the atomic age. An American by the name of Bernard Baruch proposed the Baruch Plan where there would only be a certain amount of nuclear weapons that would be under the custody of the United Nations, but I think that is not a very practicable plan. I don't think any country would yield that kind of power to the United Nations. And indeed, I don't think that the United Nations should have that power. I believe there should be a total elimination of nuclear weapons. That is the only way in which we can proceed.

**WG:** But how do we trust the process?

**JD:** That's why we have to have very, very stringent methods of verification. That is the only way. It's like the ban on chemical weapons. How do we trust countries to follow that? And we have a challenge inspection built into the Chemical Weapons Convention, where a country can challenge another country to prove that they do not have weapons. And you can go inside to a country and inspect a particular facility to see if there are chemical weapons. So this is the only way in which this is possible. Of course, nobody expects nuclear disarmament to take place overnight, it has to be done in incremental stages. But it can be done, and it has to be done together with ensuring stricter verification plus a sense of security on the part of countries. Because no country is going to voluntarily disarm feeling insecure.

**WG:** Today the notion has developed that it's right for certain nations to have possession of nuclear weapons, while it's not considered right that rogue states have them. Do you feel that the United States in particular should take the lead in this matter because of its nuclear capability?

**JD:** There is no question that the United States, being the only surviving superpower, has an enormous leadership role, an onus, to lead in every way – morally, politically, and economically,

and in the area of nuclear weapons they have already shown remarkable leadership by initiating negotiations on the Nuclear Test Ban which, of course, the current administration have refused to ratify. But nonetheless, at that point of time, it was an important initiative on the part of the Clinton Administration to bring these negotiations to a conclusion, compelling the rest of the world, who may not originally have agreed with the US objective, to also follow suit. And we finally had a Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty which had been the goal of those who worked for nuclear disarmament for decades. It was finally achieved.

Now we have a large number of countries which have signed on to it. We have a Provisional on Technical Secretariat functioning in Vienna with a vast and sophisticated array of stations around the world that can pick up any violation of that treaty. But unfortunately the treaty is still not enforced, mainly because the US administration has not seen it fit to resubmit it to the Senate. And as you know, the Senate on an earlier occasion rejected ratification of the Treaty. In the same way, the US can show leadership with regard to the elimination of nuclear weapons. It is not enough to police the world, and say that country *X* or country *Y* is developing nuclear weapons in secret, in violation of *their* obligations, when you yourself continue to have nuclear weapons which you claim are essential for *your* security. And so, the obvious question is asked: "Why is it good for *you* to have these weapons, and not good for *us*?"

And it is really an unanswerable question, if you look at it objectively. Clearly you don't want to exacerbate regional rivalries and other traditional hostilities by allowing nuclear weapons to be held in other countries. We have seen, for example, how Brazil and Argentina, which had been for many years regarded as potential nuclear countries, finally with democratization and with the understanding reached between them, give up their nuclear ambitions, and both of them signed the NPT. We have seen South Africa similarly abandon its nuclear weapon program, destroy the nuclear devices they had, and join the NPT. More recently, Cuba joined the NPT.

The NPT now has 188 countries, and so it is very important that this global norm should be matched by the elimination of nuclear weapons on the part of the existing nuclear weapon states.

**WG:** Today, as we speak, it looks like we are on the verge of a war. Yesterday I heard Vice President Cheney speak on *Meet the Press*. He was asked whether we would consider using nuclear weapons in this war and he did not deny that that might be a possibility. What do you feel will be the ramifications of this war for the future?

**JD:** Well, I think we are then going into a slippery slope that will be difficult to avoid. If we break the taboo on the use of nuclear weapons, which have not been used since 1945 after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, I believe that all hell will break loose! And we will begin to see nuclear weapons being used by others, including by terrorist groups. We already see an erosion of global norms with regard to disarmament. We see a lowering of the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons. India and Pakistan frequently exchange threats, barely veiled, about the possible use of nuclear weapons against each other. We have had other global leaders talk about crossing the nuclear threshold, even though their countries are members of the NPT.

All this is very disturbing. And it stems from an overall sense that nuclear weapons are once again becoming the primary instruments of war rather than being the political weapon that they were in the Cold War, a political weapon that should be destroyed because it is no longer of any value. I cannot believe that a responsible, rational leader today would actually ask for a nuclear weapon to be used as a weapon of war in a war fighting strategy.

**WG:** Can you discuss some of the creative initiatives that have been put forward to mediate disputes without resorting to the use of armaments?

**JD:** Well of course, we have had numerous peace treaties and other arrangements that have been made both through the United Nations, and outside, to resolve disputes. We have an International Court of Justice which has resolved border disputes, boundary questions, maritime borders included, through peaceful negotiations, which have been accepted by countries and prevented any conflict from arising. We also must realise that economic development is often the key to conflict avoidance. Because when countries develop economically and when there is prosperity to be shared, one of the important motives of going to war is eliminated.

And I believe that this is another way in which we can have the peaceful settlement of disputes. The United Nations Charter, in Chapter 6, talks about the pacific settlement of disputes. And it is in that area that the Secretary General has invested a huge amount of his personal capital by making his good offices available to a number of countries. We have special representatives of the Secretary General in numerous hotspots. They aren't always successful. Political problems are very complex, and they cannot be solved through the wave of a wand. You have to have a great deal of patience, look at the root causes, and try to have compromise. It takes time, but it is so, so much more preferable to solving problems through the use of weapons of war, which kill and which cause incalculable damage to countries. We have to be able to find better ways of resolving conflict.

**WG:** One final question. Are you optimistic that nuclear disarmament will take place in your lifetime?

**JD:** We have to be optimistic. Because I think it is in the nature of humankind to progress in its existence. If you look at what has happened in the last five decades since World War II – we have not had a global war, we have not had nuclear weapons being used; we have seen the end of Apartheid which, at one stage, seemed to be an evil empire which would never go away.

And so I'm optimistic. I had not believed in the area of disarmament that we would have a CTBT (Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty) so soon. We have had that. We still don't have tests taking place. And so I believe that nuclear disarmament *is* possible in my lifetime. Nevertheless, we will, I think, continue to find that the possible uses of nuclear weapons are so horrendous, and today, especially, with the dangers of terrorism, I believe wisdom will dawn on our leaders so that they will negotiate a nuclear disarmament treaty.

**WG:** Thank you so much.

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For information concerning Mr. Dhanapala's writing and speeches:

<http://disarmament.un.org/speech/statements.htm>