

Delivering peace for Aceh

an interview with President Martti Ahtisaari

President Martti Ahtisaari was President of Finland from 1994 to 2000. In 2000 he founded the Crisis Management Initiative (CMI), which he chairs. He is currently Special Envoy of the Secretary-General of the United Nations for the future status process for Kosovo.

Accord: Were you familiar with the details and dynamics of the Aceh conflict or familiar with any of the key parties prior to the tsunami of December 2004?

President Ahtisaari: Only in very broad terms. I did not know the parties personally. As early as February 2004 I had been contacted by Farid Husain and Juha Christensen. My message was that the Indonesian government should start thinking seriously about what they could offer that would be interesting enough to bring the other party to the table. The elections later that year – the first direct presidential elections in the history of Indonesia – brought Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to power, which was a positive sign. Juha came to see me a few days before Christmas 2004 and said that the parties were prepared to come to Helsinki if I was ready to mediate their talks. It was agreed that the Swedish-based GAM parties would come to Helsinki so that I could get to know them as well. This happened in early January 2005.

In late 1999, Husaini Hassan of the Free Aceh Movement Government Council (MP-GAM) contacted the Finnish government (then under your presidency) about whether Finland would offer its good offices in negotiations between GAM and Jakarta.

Interestingly – and probably due to the many other demands – I do not recall being aware of this at that time, and it was probably a communication that went through the foreign office. At that time, the Acehnese were watching Kosovo very closely, looking for international assistance and brokerage.

What had changed by 2005 that made progress possible?

A major change was the new government, which included prominent individuals who had been involved in previous ceasefire talks brokered by the Centre for Humanitarian Development (HDC) and were familiar with the issues.

There was a clear mandate with clear parameters. There had been time to think through earlier failures. History matters – and time itself is important for weighing up options and opportunities. There was a certain realism about the political trajectory – and indeed the tsunami made it a historical juncture in that so much depended on getting the agreement right. I was rather tough with the parties on several occasions. If demands were totally impossible, I had to tell them so in no uncertain terms. At these talks they had commitment to a serious outcome.



Source: Reuters/Lehtikuva Lehtikuva

Was the new Indonesian government's increased legitimacy and political authority over the military a factor in the success of talks?

The new administration was important and a breakthrough in terms of credibility and confidence building. But you must remember that the role and behaviour of the Indonesian military are historically part of a structure that will take time and multiple reforms to change. As the institution only received part of its operating income from the national budget, it had licence to raise revenues in other ways and through business activities. Over the years, a web of opportunities for extortion, illegal transactions and business deals built up – and in Aceh a kind of competition with the rebels for local revenues, taxes and fines.

Of course, some behaviour needed to stop immediately. We received detailed information from the GAM in spring of 2005 about atrocities in Aceh that led me to visit Jakarta in May. I voiced my concern strongly and advised that certain offending parties be withdrawn from the province immediately. Their presence would have caused anxiety and mistrust in the negotiation process.

How important was it that talks were held in Finland?

It was important that they be held outside Indonesia for several reasons and there were strong points in favour of a European setting. I felt from very early stages that the monitoring of any agreement was going to be crucial and that European Union (EU) involvement would be desirable. Also, it was necessary that the parties be isolated from the press. Of course this is not always possible, given the ease and speed of modern

communications, but the parties agreed to say very little to the media during the negotiations. Both mediation team and parties had a choice – be nice to the press or work to try to solve real problems and find an agreement.

An underlying principle of the talks was that 'nothing is agreed until everything is agreed' – which meant that neither party could claim any victories during the process. All the agreements were included in the MoU, which was published only at the end. Would this formula transfer easily to other talks settings?

What you call a 'formula' is only possible if the parties themselves are disciplined. In this case the parties behaved rather well: there was no 'leaking' and a measure of seriousness. Such discretion is, after all, an indication of whether negotiations are genuinely a means to an end (the end to violence for a peaceful outcome) or a vehicle for point scoring and more combativeness. To a certain degree many contested issues are inter-connected, and there will be ebbs and flows in the 'give and take' of negotiations. Hence the need to work towards a whole picture and a full agreement before claiming progress.

CMI frequently advocates that 'a mediator must know where he or she is taking the negotiations.' Does this mean you formulate your own favoured vision of the outcome?

'Taking the negotiations' here is like enabling safe passage rather than a detailed final destination. As I mention in the book *Making Peace*, a good mediator is like a harbour pilot, alerting others to the places to avoid so as not to run aground. I am rather critical of

open-ended processes in which third-party intervention becomes a new vehicle for the conflict itself. Realism is critical. It was clear that the government was not offering independence and I had to work out with GAM how they could obtain the things they wanted, which they thought independence would have fulfilled. Our task was to examine whether we could reach an agreement on this basis. The outcome would be the next best alternative to independence and it needed to be guaranteed by proper legal arrangements.

It is often pointed out that these are unequal or 'asymmetrical' talks. The question for the mediator is one of balance, how to best achieve a fair deal for both. A clear mandate also implies a clear time frame. If there are genuine needs and reasons for an extension, this is acceptable. But it simply cannot be an open-ended process or it will go on forever.

Did your personal good offices also bring both the EU and ASEAN on board for the Aceh Monitoring Mission (AMM)? How important was this body and would more direct international oversight be helpful even today?

One thing that history teaches us is that NGOs should not monitor peace agreements. Very early on the EU monitoring role was a key idea. We need to know who can do what – what one can and cannot do. There was no question of UN involvement after the East Timor experience. The government did not want to internationalize the Aceh question – for them it was an internal matter. The government had already looked in a constructive way for a role for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the EU-ASEAN combination proved to be both acceptable and highly successful.

I originally thought that the AMM was leaving Aceh too early. The mission did receive a necessary extension of operational time. Staying too long is not good either. The duration of international oversight is a difficult call. It is crucial that new political arrangements move forward, and that agreed mechanisms work and will deliver the peace. For example, the elections in Aceh were a milestone in the transfer of responsibility. The EU and ASEAN are not formally present now as monitors but relationships continue.

In retrospect, could both amnesty and reintegration have been better articulated in the MoU so as to avoid layers of subsequent misunderstanding and disagreement?

The mechanisms for amnesty have by and large worked. On reintegration, I believe it is beneficial to have local ownership of these issues in terms of defining terms and process. In our own societies policy

formation is not a smooth, straight line – leaders and political actors argue, political parties split, personality politics can dominate and alliances rise and fall. The key thing in the implementation of the MoU is that the government and GAM should do what they have promised to do. It follows that we must emphasize the rule of law in democratic development. To guarantee human rights we must have the rule of law.

Are there lessons that third parties still need to learn about provisions for decision-making on implementing agreements, particularly when the agreements are very concise and general?

It is vital to get the legal structure right. This has been true for amnesty and reintegration and will be a continual challenge for the management of oil and gas revenues.

I have already referred to the importance of the government delivering on what it has promised. Political leadership should not use the parliament as cover for not following the MoU in spirit. Accompaniment, high level follow-up and mentoring roles are extremely important. We can better learn how to give indirect assistance while letting actual responsibility remain with the parties.

In explaining the breakthrough of the Helsinki talks, what balance would you say there was in the Aceh talks between your skill as a mediator and the 'ripeness' of the conflict to be solved?

Certainly the conflict was more 'ripe' in 2005 than in 2000. I brought quite a bit of previous experience to the table, but you have to be lucky too. With all the skill in the world, I cannot make a mediation process 'pregnant' in the sense of bearing the fruit of peace. The parties themselves must do this. If the parties genuinely are ready for the birth of a peace process then a mediator can be the midwife, so to speak.

I would emphasize the fact that one should never deal with such a thing alone. I had the privilege of working with great people. My colleagues from CMI played a vital role. Many others worked quietly and behind the scenes, being very supportive: UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, the EU's Javier Solana and Benita Ferrero-Waldner and their staff, the Olof Palme Centre, and many governments and research institutes. There is the danger that we compartmentalize roles and responsibilities, do not cooperate fully and do not use the expertise available. But in this case there was willing support and the EU acted and responded very quickly and professionally.

We have to keep in mind why we are in this business. It is to solve problems.