The Brussels ‘backstage’ of the Aceh peace process

Antje Herrberg

Whist a considerable amount has been written on the Aceh peace talks held in Helsinki under the auspices of the Crisis Management Initiative (CMI), less has been said on how the European Union (EU) got involved in supporting this initiative. After the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in August 2005, the EU broke new ground in launching the Aceh Monitoring Mission (AMM), which was the first EU cooperation with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the first instance of such an integrated civil-military mission. This account is drawn from my own experiences and interviews with some key individuals who worked ‘behind the scenes’ to support the peace process. It will also offer reflections on lessons learned for future application.

The early days: careful discussions

In 2004, the CMI was a new, emerging non-governmental organization with nine staff, with just one person based in Brussels. It had been created more or less as an extension of the office of former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari to enable his engagement in independent projects relating to crisis management and conflict resolution. He had been approached to mediate renewed talks between the Government of Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), and he worked closely with his staff in the wake of the tsunami crisis in January 2005 as it became clear that a meeting between the sides was imminent.

The role that CMI and its chairman played was unofficial, informal and independent. This ‘private diplomacy’ aspect was crucial, particularly for the Indonesian government, which did not want to internationalize ‘domestic’ affairs. CMI was well placed for the mediation role given Ahtisaari’s widely accepted impartiality as a mediator and access to networks with governments, with the added advantage of being a ‘Nordic’ presence in close geographical proximity to Sweden, where the GAM leadership was based.

The Finnish Foreign Ministry responded favourably to the involvement of CMI and indicated its readiness to facilitate the talks. It made it clear that it did not desire a political profile but would provide technical support (venue, transportation and logistics, and security). Ahtisaari’s private contacts with President Halonen and Foreign Minister Tuomioja helped ensure political support for the process. It was not known how long the talks would take, so the government’s commitment was not specified in terms of money or modalities, but was open-ended. Under-Secretary of State Hannu Himanen stressed that money was not an issue for Finland: ‘We did not anticipate nor had any detailed information on possible EU support to CMI. It never affected the Foreign Ministry’s decisions.’ At the same time, however,
Ahtisaari took the view that broader EU involvement would be advantageous in the long run for support to any ensuing peace process.

**The EU connection**

The EU framework for dealing with conflict at that time did not include explicit provision for mediation, but emanated from the European Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) and assistance schemes focused on conflict prevention and crisis management. In addition, there was the Rapid Reaction Mechanism (RRM) that could be activated in response to crisis, in this case following the tsunami. While there had been support from Brussels for previous attempts at brokering ceasefires in Aceh, the tsunami relief effort dominated institutional responses at this time. In total the EU and its member states mobilized €1.5 billion for all tsunami-affected areas, most of which was eventually channelled to the Indonesian Multi-Donor Trust Fund.

In 2005 the Commission was willing to go beyond humanitarian support to fulfil a political role in facilitating peace. It had already invested in the peace process, providing €2.3 million to the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue’s mediation efforts in 2002. According to one of the RRM managers, Patrick Dupont (one of the earliest supporters of the CMI mediation): “We wanted to work on peace, not only on a humanitarian crisis. We were on common accord on the fundamental elements for a peace process in Aceh.

**EU institutions and mechanisms**

Whereas the European Commission (hereafter the Commission) is a supranational institution that administers and implements important financial budgets, the Council of the European Union (hereafter the Council) represents individual member states’ political will.

The EU Rapid Reaction Mechanism (RRM) streamlined existing areas for the alleviation of crisis (human rights work, border management, election monitoring, civil emergency assistance and so forth). In 2007 it was replaced by the **Instrument for Stability**, (which does not carry the RRM’s six month limitation) as a response instrument for the Commission, accessed through the Directorate-General for External Relations.

The European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) is a major element of the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), formally under the domain of the Council. The ESDP’s civilian dimension involves tasks in many different areas, including police and rule of law operations, civil administration and protection, monitoring and support for EU special envoys.
We wanted to provide the hardware (for reconstruction) and the software (peace). We were favourably disposed towards working with NGOs on the Aceh peace process. We had experience with the HDC and knew of the advantages and needs of a low profile, less political edge and more flexibility.*

The European Commission’s Predrag Avramović took up position in the RRM in January 2005, and shortly after he travelled to Indonesia with his colleague Aldo dell’Ariccia to assess the situation. While there he investigated the function or role CMI played in Indonesia, and he recalls encountering a certain scepticism about the organization as they had no presence on the ground, neither local presence nor partners. In retrospect, however, he recalls that this ‘was probably good’: in other words, CMI offered a ‘fresh start’ and there were no perceptions of complicated agendas or vested interests.

From the beginning of February, CMI was in daily contact with Avramović to seek assistance from the Commission for the Aceh peace negotiations. The submission of an application was not a ‘one off’ affair. Indeed a number of proposals were submitted, each one reflecting lengthy discussions with Avramović who worked with his hierarchy to find a suitable formula. He recalls that a ‘team’ spirit evolved over time — rather than one of a donor and an applicant for a project — and it focused on substance and results.

The Commission approved the RRM grant proposal for a maximum of €269,375 for the period of six months stipulated for the peace talks. Many questioned whether the six-month time frame would be conducive for a peace process as it would put all parties under considerable pressure. However, it was an opportunity for the parties and the mediator to focus on the ‘essentials,’ as well as reducing the potential for too much political manoeuvring by the parties — a kind of ‘make or break’ arrangement. It also propelled a number of EU actors (member states and the Council Secretariat) to start thinking ahead to the eventual consequences of successful talks.

EU financial backing for ‘political projects’ — the CMI together with its support for the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Jakarta who received a grant for capacity building of local democracy (€220,000) — amounted to about less then 0.25 per cent of the amount of the Commission’s support to Aceh in response to the tsunami. This should exemplify that is not the size of grants that mattered as much, but the initiative and quality of working relations between CMI and the EU.

The fact that the Commission supported the peace talks in Helsinki, and that these were endorsed by Javier Solana, High Representative for the CFSP, also had a trigger effect that provided a sense of common purpose between the two institutions: the Commission and the Council became stakeholders in the peace process. The networking and high-level political contacts would also pave the way for a new precedent: European monitoring of the eventual peace agreement.

**Towards the AMM**

From the very first round of talks in Helsinki in January 2005, the possibility of monitoring was a theme. As the Indonesian government was very clear about not wanting to ‘internationalize’ (in the sense of formal UN involvement), the EU appeared to be a credible monitor in partnership with ASEAN.

From the point of view of one Finnish national working in the Council Secretariat, the planning of a monitoring mission was already beginning then. The Council Secretariat’s DGE IX (civilian crisis management) and EUMS/Civilian Military Cell had each established the concepts it needed (Monitoring, Rule of Law, and Civilian Administration) whilst civilian capabilities for crisis management (including monitoring missions) had been examined through the ‘Civilian Headline Goal’ approved in December 2004. Enthusiasm was high, and the Council Secretariat and member states wanted to make the conceptual framework a reality.

However, many in Brussels still believed that an EU role in monitoring an eventual peace process was a risky political business because of Aceh’s remoteness and relatively minor political importance for EU member states. There were questions over whether the parties were really committed to peace, whether there would be ‘spoilers’ in the province, how precarious the security situation was, and how fast monitors could be deployed. But the ‘tsunami effect’, the desire for the EU to play a political role, institutional competition and the persuasive power of Ahtisaari translated into new political momentum. After discussions of which institution would take leadership in an eventual monitoring of the agreement, the EU was able to act in unison. According to a number of people involved this was also due to the determination of Pieter Feith, Deputy Director General of the Council, who was intrigued by the challenge and the potential of a monitoring mission. His long-standing friendship with Ahtisaari played a role as well. According to Feith, ‘If Martti believed in this as an opportunity for EU, I was ready to support him.’

As it became clear that the peace agreement was becoming a reality and would require on-the-ground monitoring, Ahtisaari probably echoed Brussels decision-makers’ thinking when he announced: ‘I am afraid that this will work.’
Over the spring and summer months, planning went into greater detail and a number of difficult questions loomed large. There were practical issues about assessing security for the mission and how to solve the immense logistical issue in terms of financing. Considerable discussions took place over the question of sending in unarmed monitors. According to the planners, thinking evolved over time as confidence grew in the parties’ commitment to peace. Pieter Feith said that what struck him most was ‘the parties’ willingness to reconcile, which was amazing when one looks at the Balkans, for example. The EU should reward such willingness for peace and that’s what we did’.

A fact-finding mission went ahead from 24 June – 2 July and included CMI’s military advisor Jaako Oksanen and consultant Juha Christensen. While the Council had no financing provision for including NGOs or experts in advance missions, a motivated and innovative staff member at the Commission found ways that made this ‘mission possible.’ The growing involvement and partnership between the Commission, the Council and CMI on the working level were also exemplified in European backstake presence during the last stages of the talks (EU observers were sent to the fourth and fifth rounds). This provided assurances for all sides on the commitments by parties and supporters of the talks, possibly providing also an additional impetus for all to succeed.

An Information Note from the Commission on 18 July provided a groundbreaking proposal for financing the mission, which provided for more debate in the Brussels arena not about how to finance it but who was allowed to finance it. The AMM was financed through member states and the CFSP budget line. Following the formal decision of the EU’s Political and Security Committee on 18 July, the Technical Assessment Mission went on to its assessment, landing in Aceh on 26 July, the same day that Javier Solana, in the presence of Ahtisaari, addressed the Political and Security Committee and commended the success of the fifth and last round of negotiations and urged member states to deliver on a monitoring mission mentioned in the Memorandum of Understanding, to be signed on 15 August. The final push by these two leaders marked the beginning of a further level of EU engagement: to provide measures for monitoring and support to sustainability of a peace agreement.

Lessons learned for supporting mediation

Many lessons could be drawn from this experience. One set of lessons concerns inter-governmental partnerships with NGOs in peacebuilding, and the way in which an NGO worked with the EU structures during the Aceh worked with the EU structures during the Aceh peace process sensitized the EU further to the value of effective partnership with NGOs. The Aceh experience helped to sharpen the concept of the Civilian Response Team (CRT). In June 2005 the Council Secretariat established a pool of pre-selected and pre-trained experts. Member States are covering the costs and can include experts from NGOs in their national pools.

Moreover, it has been shown that ‘just throwing some money’ at a ‘project’ is not what matters for the EU or possibly other regional and international organizations. Rather, when working on a ‘political project’ like the Aceh peace process it is about the ability of actors to be able to form genuine working relationships – team relationships, rather than simply those of a donor and implementer.

For track two organizations that seek partnerships with the EU, a solid network and ‘know-how’ about the politics of the EU can be a distinct advantage. This facilitates the forging of a culture of co-operation between the EU institutions and non-state actors. As much as the EU can help to forge a culture of cooperation, NGOs must make the human investment to work with political and financial stakeholders. This cannot be done artificially, or overnight. It almost requires a gradual paradigm shift that NGOs and non-state actors are important players in forging a European foreign policy culture.

Another set of lessons can be learned around investing in mediation support. The building of capacity for mediation support and mediators that can work with the EU and in turn with other regional organizations represents an enormous potential. A systematized understanding of the mechanisms, methods and practice of peace mediation could facilitate the EU ability to act in a responsive and cost-effective manner. The Aceh peace talks required relatively minute resources from the overall budget – consider what the costs could have been had there not been peace mediation.

The EU could continue to work with ASEAN and other regional organizations to build a common capacity to respond to the challenge of crisis response through mediation, and develop ways and methods of dispatching monitoring. The setting up of the UN Mediation Unit is one example where this has already come to fruition. ‘Thinking ahead’ about mediation support in the forthcoming External Action Service (which will support the new EU ‘foreign minister’) provides another key opportunity. With the support of all of these strands, we could possibly see more EU success stories like Aceh.