



The Nobel Peace Prize 2008

“for his important efforts, on several continents and over more than three decades, to resolve international conflicts”



B. SETTNIK, EPA/SCANPIX

Martti Ahtisaari

Born: 1937

Birthplace: Finland

Nationality: Finnish citizen

Current position:
Chairman of the Board,
Crisis Management Initiative

Speed read: Crisis management

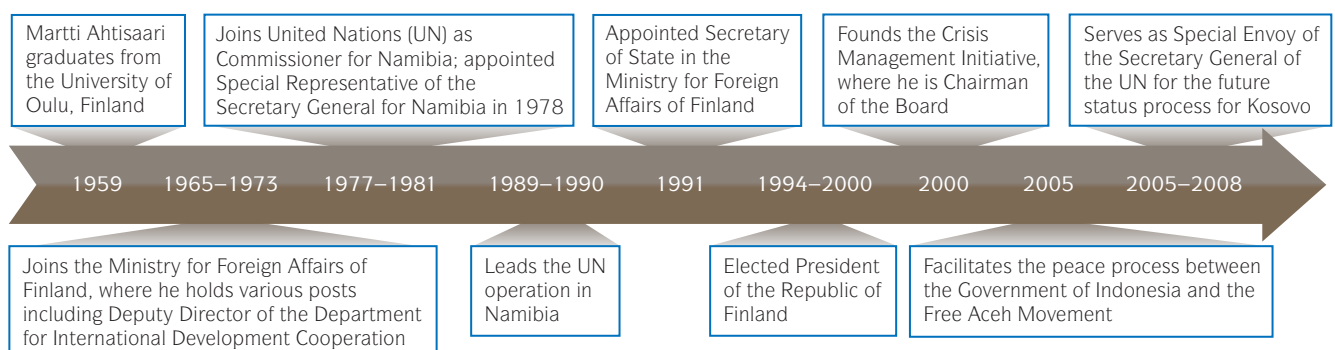


Martti Ahtisaari, former diplomat and politician, is an international trouble-shooter. Over the past two decades he has worked under a variety of mandates to attempt to bring a peaceful end to conflicts in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East. Few people have gained such a broad understanding of the intricacies of managing conflict resolution.

Ahtisaari insists that all conflicts are essentially solvable, and believes that it is the duty of the international community to intervene to prevent injustice. His approach is founded on the idea that one should never avoid the hard questions for the sake of reaching a swift but shallow agreement. His experiences have led him to formulate a number of principles underlying successful crisis resolution, including the need for rapid reaction, the importance of consistency of approach in different locations, the value of reconciliation and the necessity of an all-inclusive approach to negotiations that brings all concerned parties into discussions from the outset.

Ahtisaari's mediation has helped diffuse seemingly intractable conflicts across the globe. He was instrumental in helping to bring about Namibia's eventual independence from South Africa after long years of war. His brokering of a peace agreement between the Indonesian government and the separatist Free Aceh Movement led to the 2005 Aceh Peace Accord, after almost 30 years of conflict. In the former Yugoslavia, Ahtisaari first helped to mediate an end to the war in Kosovo in the late 1990s, and more recently, as United Nations Special Envoy, he sought to find a solution to the problem caused by the majority Albanian population's desire for independence from Serbia. In this case, however, the internationally monitored independence he proposed for Kosovo was not adopted, and the prolonged international deadlock led to Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in early 2008.

In 2000, upon retiring from the Finnish Presidency, Ahtisaari founded the Crisis Management Initiative (CMI), an independent, Helsinki-based, non-profit organisation. CMI aims to work alongside the international community to promote innovative approaches to conflict resolution, through a combination of "analysis, action and advocacy". It has already assisted in the Aceh negotiations, and is involved in ongoing efforts to bring about sustainable peace in Iraq.



Timeline: Milestones for the 2008 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Martti Ahtisaari.

In his own words: **Martti Ahtisaari**

For Martti Ahtisaari, receiving the 2008 Nobel Peace Prize provided an opportunity to hear once again from familiar faces. “All my friends have been calling me, which is of course extremely nice.” says Ahtisaari, “My assistants do nothing nowadays except to try to answer the phones.” As a former diplomat, politician and President of the Republic of Finland, who has helped bring a peaceful end to conflicts in several continents, Ahtisaari must have a long line of friendly well-wishers.

His success over the past two decades stems from his conviction that no situation is beyond resolution. “Every conflict can be solved. I think it’s a disgrace for the international community that we have allowed so many conflicts to become frozen, and we are not making a serious effort to solve them.”

According to Ahtisaari the key to solving conflicts lies in getting all parties around the table; not only those directly involved but also all other countries that can have an influence on a possible solution. The Kosovo conflict perfectly illustrates this, says Ahtisaari. “We had a contact group that included Russian Federation, United States, United Kingdom and Northern Ireland, France, Germany and Italy. It was absolutely vital in keeping the process together.”

For a negotiator like Ahtisaari, one principle is extremely important. “I insist that I will have a free hand to pick my colleagues. Because, very often, the organisations tend to send people that are not perhaps the most suited in that.” In Kosovo, Namibia, and Aceh, Ahtisaari chose his own people for the task. “They have to be able to work together. They have to be professionals. They have to master their speciality area, so that you can trust them.”

Hence the need for organisations like the Crisis Management Initiative (CMI), which Ahtisaari founded after retiring from the Finnish Presidency. CMI works alongside the international community to promote innovative approaches to conflict resolution. Because it is a non-profit organisation Ahtisaari says it has the advantage of being able to

“It’s a disgrace for the international community that we have allowed so many conflicts to become frozen”

adopt a more flexible approach than governments. “And of course, the mere fact that I’m Former Head of State and Former Under-Secretary in the UN system, it means that I can get in touch with anybody in the world, in theory.”

One thing Ahtisaari emphasises with respect to CMI is rapid reaction, in other words the ability to respond effectively and without delay to any requests from parties at critical moments in conflicts and crisis situations. Adopting the rapid reaction approach, though, requires sizeable finances. “You need to carry out very careful pre-feasibility and feasibility studies before you enter any crisis situation.” Ahtisaari hopes his Peace Prize will help the CMI to secure funding more easily. “Far too much of my time goes for knocking on the doors of the donors. We can do much more than we have done so far.”



UN PHOTO/MILTON GRANT

Martti Ahtisaari has helped bring a peaceful end to conflicts affecting countries in several continents.

This article is based on a telephone interview with Martti Ahtisaari following the announcement of the 2008 Nobel Peace Prize. To listen to the interview in full, visit http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2008/ahtisaari-interview.html