

Meeting report

OSLOforum08

Annual Mediators' Retreat

Mediating in a challenging
environment

Losby Gods

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The Centre for Humanitarian
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improving the global response to
armed conflict through mediation.

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Executive summary

With 104 participants, the 2008 OSLO forum was the biggest in the annual series so far. The forum was very well received and participants gave exceptionally positive feedback.

There was a larger and more varied cast of speakers this year, aimed at continuing the trend of confronting mediators with the perspectives of critical actors in peace processes beyond their own peers – and this, combined with a strategy of designing the agenda around the expertise and interests of the participants rather than around abstract concepts, proved successful and led to the most lively event the OSLO forum has yet seen, with as much discussion and networking activity taking place between sessions as during them. To allow for frank and focused exchanges, discussions included fewer plenaries and participants were given a choice of parallel sessions to attend throughout the retreat.

Following a welcome by the Norwegian Secretary of State, Raymond Johansen, former President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mohammed Khatami, shared his reflections on the importance and challenges of dialogue in an opening keynote speech, and engaged with participants in the following session of questions and answers.

Other agenda highlights included a speech by Lord Malloch Brown, Minister for Africa, Asia and UN, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, UK, on the situation in Myanmar. Equal attention was drawn by a panel on the prospects of mediation, chaired by Lyse Doucet from the BBC World Service, featuring the Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jonas Gahr Støre, and the Director of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Martin Griffiths.

Guest speakers and presenters also included: Gareth Evans, President of International Crisis Group and former Foreign Minister of Australia; Jonathan Powell, former Chief of Staff to British Prime Minister Tony Blair; Rami Khouri, Director, Issam Fares Institute, American University of Beirut, and Editor of the *Lebanese Daily Star*; Roger Cohen, Editor at large of the *International Herald Tribune*; Nuala O'Loan, Special Envoy for the Irish Government to East Timor and former Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland; and many others.

Discussions throughout the forum focused on who can be talked to and about what. Will imminent changes in world politics (especially US politics) herald significant changes? What support do mediators need and what support is available? Specific discussions included experiences of non-international facilitation and the significance of gender sensitivity as a mediation tool. Also, the challenges to dialogue in Iraq and in Dafur/Chad featured prominently, along with a spotlight on former combatants' views on demobilisation and disarmament. Situation reports from Abkhazia, Afghanistan, Cyprus, Lebanon, Nepal and Somalia were delivered by experienced mediators during informal breakfast sessions.

The forum's final panel was on mediating regional dynamics in the Middle East in the light of Iran's increasingly pivotal role. This was followed by closing remarks from Norwegian State Secretary of Defence, Espen Barth Eide, and from Martin Griffiths.

Keynote speech: President Mohammad Khatami on dialogue and negotiations

The forum opened with a keynote speech by the former President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mr Mohammad Khatami, in which he reflected on the value of dialogue in bridging major ideological differences. He called on participants to create an environment in which civilisations can learn from each other through a dynamic exchange of experiences.

Khatami emphasised that today's perception of societies being structured around centre and periphery no longer adequately describes the world security system. The events of September 11 showed that even the most marginal segments of society have the ability to strike a blow to the greatest of powers. The historical mindsets that exist in different parts of the world therefore need to change. In order to tackle violence and extremism the world needs new visions and new collective methods that can be realised only through dialogue.

Khatami stressed that dialogue and negotiation are two different concepts. While the insistence of politicians on negotiation can be useful, it often implies the imposition of views on the weaker party, and should not be confused with dialogue. Dialogue is not necessarily political but, if held among representatives of different civilisations and cultures, it will have great political effects. There are no preconditions to dialogue, but a common aim to create more understanding and knowledge of the position of the *other*. The former President explained that in war as well as in a dialogue there is always an *I* and an *other*. While in war the *other* is seen as an enemy that either has to give in or will be annihilated, the basis for dialogue is fellowship and kindness – and, as one of the participants later remarked, the realisation that others are fully worthy of respect or at least genuine curiosity. When the image of the *other* is an image of the enemy, conflict – and a clash of civilisations – is inevitable.

In order to have dialogue and peace among civilisations, better understanding is paramount. If the aim of dialogue is mutual understanding it must be based on the feeling that there is justice for all nations and members of the human race. A culture of understanding and fellowship, as opposed to hostility and enmity, needs to be established to overcome what Khatami identified as the obstacles to justice: backwardness, dictatorship and the humiliation of other cultures and civilisations. Khatami emphasised that this process requires effort by the international community, and particularly the provision of appropriate instruments within the United Nations. He suggested that the UN can and should use the concept of an international 'alliance of peace' instead of an 'alliance of war', to supplement the dialogue of civilisations. He stressed the role of the UN in establishing peace and pointed out that, by laying the necessary foundations for the expansion of peace, mediators are benefactors of society.

In conclusion, Khatami noted that East and West share a common concern and a common goal: both worry about insecurity, one because of terrorism, the other because of oppression, and both share a desire for peace. Khatami stressed that West and East have to learn from each other. The West must look at the East not only as subject matter to be

known so that the goal of economic and political hegemony can be achieved, but as a partner to the West in an interconnected world where the security of each part depends upon the security of everyone else. The East can benefit from the culture and civilisation of the West for its own development, progress and freedom, as much as the West can benefit from the culture and civilisation of the East to fill many moral and ethical gaps.

Situation report breakfasts: Nepal, Somalia, Afghanistan, Cyprus, Lebanon and Abkhazia

Building on last year's success, a number of mediators and envoys agreed again to provide informal situation reports, and to answer questions from small groups of interested participants. This year's informal breakfast sessions featured discussions on Nepal, Somalia, Afghanistan, Cyprus, Lebanon and Abkhazia.

Nepal

Giving an overview of recent changes in Nepal, the presenter described the resolution of the conflict in Nepal, the subsequent elections and the peaceful ending of the 240-year-old monarchy as extraordinary. It was 'overwhelmingly a Nepali achievement' which had taken place without a formal third-party mediator. Yet, it seems to have been a peace process in which the UN and others had played an effective supportive role. The facilitative role played by some (including India and Switzerland) was a very good example of informal third-party mediation playing a useful role.

One of the lessons the presenter drew from the Nepali experience was that one cannot withdraw support once an agreement is made. A government official from Nepal confirmed that the UN is playing an important supportive role to the new government. However, it was felt that in UN headquarters in New York there is a tendency to want to put a tick next to the 'Nepalese peace process', as if it were now over and done with despite the fact that several aspects of implementing the agreement are far from resolved.

One of the sticking points the presenter foresaw was over former combatants. It was unclear either how the former Maoist rebels would be integrated into the army, as the agreement stipulated, or how the Nepalese army would in reality democratise. Moreover there is no real sense of what a federation really means to the parties involved, and how it will become a reality is also unclear.

Somalia

The Somalia breakfast focused on recent developments following the successful completion of talks in May 2008, facilitated by the UN between the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS) in Djibouti. While the Djibouti process focused on bringing together the government and the most formalised of the opposition groups, there will be a focus on expanding the constituency around the agreement in the longer term. Participants raised the key question of who to bring in as a mediator, and when – including the challenge of ignoring the smaller groups who may cause problems for the peace process at a later stage. A high-level committee of the TFG and the ARS will

be established to ensure cooperation, and the two parties are to embark on a process of explaining the agreement to their constituencies.

The role of the diaspora was highlighted – in terms of both being a potentially positive influence on the peace process, and more troubling involvement in fuelling the conflict. Despite these concerns, many members of the diaspora are not held accountable in their host countries. The overall issue of impunity in Somalia was also highlighted as a priority which needs to be raised more strongly on the international stage. The role of external parties in Somalia is also a reality and one that the peace process needs to adapt to in order to ensure that all key actors remain committed to peace. An international conference on reconstruction is planned for December – and again the role of the diaspora will be important in post-conflict reconstruction.

Afghanistan

This situation report looked at the multitude of challenges facing Afghanistan, including: the government's declining credibility caused by endemic corruption and a reluctance to punish key officials linked to the drug trade; the lack of coordination between the international actors; the widespread perception of aid ineffectiveness compounded by food shortages and rising inflation; and Pakistan's unwillingness to do more on its side of the border despite the close links between the insurgents in Afghanistan and those in Pakistan's tribal areas, which has thus far militated against a coherent approach by the two governments to stemming the violence. The perception, therefore, is that little has been achieved since the Bonn Agreement.

Participants felt that the international community's decision to support the Northern Alliance commanders after the fall of Kabul and the failure by the government to disarm the armed groups was a big mistake in retrospect, as was the reluctance of the relevant countries in the early years to expand the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) beyond Kabul. The discussion also briefly touched on the difficulties in developing a regional approach to the conflict, which would include countries like Pakistan and Iran. The view was expressed that the US is inclined to be more reflective of late.

A political solution was considered unlikely in the present circumstances. Reconciliation in the Afghan context is still to be defined, and the Taliban structure and dynamics are also unclear. In response to a question from the audience as to whether conditions should be attached for a dialogue with the Taliban, one speaker said that it was too early to decide, while another felt that it would be difficult to constitute a process and warned of the danger of focusing on only one armed group. A third speaker highlighted the need for a conflict assessment once there was agreement on a process which would identify the actors who would participate in a dialogue.

Cyprus

This situation report highlighted the new atmosphere among the leaders and the population on both sides of the Cypriot conflict, following the presidential elections of February 2008. The Turkish Cypriots felt that this election was a call for change. The discussions are developing quickly and the working groups and technical committees are meeting frequently. Some 70 people are involved on each side. Participants agreed that it is now much easier to agree on agenda points and names of committees. The meeting between the two leaders on 23 May 2008 was presented as a real breakthrough.

Participants discussed several other issues including the role of the press (and outsiders in general) in questioning the positions in the negotiations, and the consequences of the upcoming Supreme Court decision on the Turkish government. The role of the international community, especially the European Union, was also raised, and it was noted that there is an urgent need to separate the Turkish accession issue from the Cypriot issue. Participants also discussed the necessity to internalise the process, not arguing for a withdrawal of the UN but requiring a new approach regarding the Cypriot ownership on the process. Civil society organisations were also indicated as a key factor to be included in the negotiation process. Finally, this breakfast session stressed that Cyprus faces a unique opportunity, although it was underlined that firm guarantees and financial support will be crucial for the implementation of any agreement.

Lebanon

The European vision of the situation in Lebanon has previously dictated the process, with a tendency to ignore the opposition. The opposition sees a power-sharing agreement as the only way to resolve the situation. For the first time, the recent Doha agreement was the reversal of the usual mediation exercises in Lebanon. It took place in the region and looked at institutional reforms for coexistence of communities. It agreed to get back to the 1970 constituencies and gave the opposition a blocking vote on key issues. The agreement was accused of being a regressive step by bringing the country back to sectarianism, but the panellists argued that Lebanese people need a period of time in which confessional groups can feel safe and build trust.

Qatar was chosen because it was felt that there was no point in going for the usual international efforts, seen as polarising the situation in Lebanon. During the process, Qatar kept Iran, Syria and Saudi Arabia informed. Finally, it was mentioned that it will be an interesting new development to observe Hezbollah in a government position. Already, the group is being increasingly criticised by the population.

Abkhazia

The situation between Georgia and the separatist region of Abkhazia has deteriorated significantly over the past months and the two sides are on the brink of renewed military confrontation. Provocations from either side abound, but while they used to be largely rhetoric, recent alleged troop movements and preparations on part of the Georgians, and the violation of Georgian airspace and the downing of unmanned Georgian drones in all likelihood by Russia or with Russian support have raised tensions further. Russia, which is mandated by the Commonwealth of Independent States to provide most peacekeepers in the region, has significantly increased their number – and thus its military presence.

There is a strong international dimension to the Georgian conflict zones, with mainland Georgia being backed by the US and the West more generally, and the separatist regions being backed by Russia. Indeed much activity is focused on Georgian–Russian relations at the expense of direct dealings between the parties. Initially, the Abkhaz and Georgians anticipated this international dimension of the conflict as part of their strategies. Both sides hoped that an internationalisation would be advantageous to their cause. The Abkhaz were said to have watched closely the bid for Georgian NATO membership – one of the most prized goals for the small US-backed Caucasus state – in the hope that Abkhaz territory might become a buffer zone between NATO countries and Russia, effectively securing Russian support, but discouraging annexation of the region by Russia and guaranteeing independence. With few expectations for Russia to recognise Abkhazia, the strategy has not held its promise and the parties have to find new ways to come to terms.

Given its good relations with both Russia and Georgia, Germany is felt to be uniquely placed and has repeatedly offered mediation between Russia and Georgia. So far Russia has shown little interest, and Georgia has shown little restraint in reciprocating provocations.

Talking while shooting: Changing attitudes to dialogue in Iraq

Reviewing the current challenges to stability in Iraq, the panellists discussed the current and mid-term prospects for Iraq. About five million Iraqis are internally displaced, one Iraqi in three is unemployed, wealth distribution is ineffective, and governmental structures remain dysfunctional and plagued by a clear pattern of favouring Shia citizens. The recent Sunni awakening movement needs to be understood as a reaction, i.e. a move away from Al-Qaeda to gain tactical advantage over Shia groups. Sectarian resentment remains particularly high, as all prominent Iraqi political actors rely on a sectarian and paramilitary structure to maintain their basis of power. Whether the current political system crystallises sectarian arrangements was perceived very much as an open question, in which some highlighted the challenge posed to the current political organisation, including the constitution, by the Sunni community.

The discussion also considered the current US strategy and the prospects of political dialogue in Iraq, and whether the occupation is an obstacle. Participants also questioned whether the US had been effective in 'defeating the insurgents' or if it had not simply reached out to the most radical elements. Although participants agreed that the challenges facing Iraq remain daunting, observers should not overlook the positive developments. While endemic patterns of violence remain, despite counter-insurgency programmes, the levels of violence have dropped by an estimated 80 per cent compared to the same period last year. At last, the Kurdish political leadership seems more aware that independence might not be a feasible political project, and governmental forces were deployed in neighbourhoods controlled by the Mahdi Army, after their leader publicly agreed to it.

Contemplating the role for dialogue and mediation, the inherent difficulty of interacting with political actors whose regional principals are not at the negotiating table was particularly noted. What happens when 'you sit down at a table with someone, and there's someone else behind'? Panellists and participants discussed the challenge of allowing and pursuing the emergence and inclusion of 'good guys' in an environment in which the 'bad guys' have strong leverage and a significant power basis. Some participants raised concerns about the impact of the US presidential elections on US military presence and policy in Iraq, calling for effective longer-term solutions as opposed to mere good intentions.

Breaking the vicious circle: Darfur and Chad

During this session, panellists examined the challenges of achieving peace in the interconnected conflicts in Chad and Darfur. Once a localised conflict, this has increasingly

taken on a cross-border character and has now a regional dimension. Both governments refuse to accept the problem and are resisting efforts from the international community by arguing that these are internal affairs. Many regional actors are involved in the various negotiation attempts, including Eritrea, Egypt and Libya among others, and the various channels of communication further complicate international mediation efforts.

The solution for Darfur envisaged by the international community covers security and power/ wealth sharing, but the panel felt that the situation actually requires a comprehensive agreement encompassing issues of governance, history, culture and nation building. After last year's AU-UN-mediated talks in Sirte, Libya, the African Union recognised five groups who do not all recognise each other and cannot agree to sit at the same table. While some were ready to start negotiations calling for a political framework, others insisted on security guarantees before the talks.

Nevertheless, the panellists did believe that it is possible to gather a critical mass to start the process and that greater and larger buy-in could be obtained at a later stage. Further, the panel stressed that the process will ultimately require a regional overview and particularly mentioned the Great Lakes regional agreement as an example for comparison.

The causal link between attacks in Chad and in Darfur was presented as a window of opportunity to resolve the conflict in Darfur that the international community must not miss. Chadian issues seem less difficult to deal with and a resolution on the Chadian side could have a positive impact on the Darfur side. The panel also stressed the striking lack of engagement of the international community in Chad.

Unlike Darfur rebel groups, Chadian opposition groups already have a common front and their conditions are not impossible to attain. In addition to more security to guarantee the process and enable its implementation, they are also asking for institutional involvement. Panellists and participants further discussed rebels' involvement in the region. The recent attacks on the Chadian and Sudanese capitals are a consequence of the competition between the groups to get concrete and significant recognition in the political process and push the international community to consider them as important players.

Finally, the impact of a potential indictment from the International Criminal Court (ICC) was debated. The Sudanese government, like the rebels, is worried about such a possibility. It will most probably insist on the inclusion of an amnesty in any agreement on Darfur. The timing of such an indictment was discussed, as it will make the government very nervous – most likely triggering a hostile reaction and further cutting humanitarian access.

The case for engagement

The panel on the prospects of mediation, featuring the Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs Jonas Gahr Støre, offered a variety of perspectives on whether, why, how and when mediators should engage. Sharing insights of his work as the Norwegian Foreign Minister, Gahr Støre spoke about the need to rethink our understanding of the war on terror and to update mental maps to be able to deal with the realities on the ground. Other panellists agreed that the war on terror is a paradigm that has severely limited the possibilities and the effectiveness of

mediation by determining how we analyse conflicts and offering a convenient tool for states in the West to isolate their opponents. Terrorism is an extremely elastic term, and one needs to be careful when labelling organisations and actors as terrorists.

Governments have plenty of options and instruments for talking to other governments, but it is more difficult for a government to deal with groups or individuals, especially if they do not have a recognised political programme. Simply refusing to engage and ignoring such groups or individuals will not make them disappear. Not talking, the Minister argued, simply does not seem to be a feasible option. In particular, he emphasised the necessity of talking to legally elected governments such as Hamas. Interestingly, the vast majority of participants voted in favour of talking to Hamas, but significantly fewer voted for talking to Al Qaeda.

Some participants felt that the decision on whether or not to talk to certain groups is ultimately a utilitarian one, depending on the particularities of a given case and on what the purpose of talking would be. The principle of talking to everybody may be as misguided as the principle of not talking. For example, one would choose not to talk to an organisation that has no political programme with which to engage usefully (e.g. criminals). Others disagreed with this notion and in particular dismissed the concept of ripeness, insisting that it is crucial always to encourage contact even if there is no prospect for immediate solutions. Keeping a channel of communication open even if there is no progress in sight is very important for building confidence – in fact much mediation work can happen in advance of the actual peace talks.

There was a consensus that whoever is to engage effectively in talks must address and nuance the questions of whether talking to armed groups provides those groups with legitimacy. While it is difficult to deny that talking to armed groups means giving them at least a certain degree of legitimacy, one participant pointed out that legitimacy should not be perceived as being conferred by the West and that groups primarily gain legitimacy by having the confidence of their community.

While talking is seen as an effective tool of engagement, financial support (e.g. from the World Bank and donor governments) was seen as another. The question was raised of how far the decision not to talk has to be accompanied by a halt in financing. Money was said to be an important incentive and as such is instrumental to peace processes, and politics should be provided with as many instruments as possible for solving conflicts.

Tricks of the trade: Gender sensitivity as a mediation tool

This session highlighted concrete examples of the application of gender sensitivity as a mediation tool under-used in peace processes. Although 'gender sensitivity' is clearly different from women's equality, the discussions very soon focused on the benefits of the greater inclusion of women in peace processes. There seems to be a general consensus that the more deliberate inclusion of women is one of the most pressing and obvious areas for action.

The examples and discussions reflected the diverse reasons and motivations of women participating in peace processes. Examples drawn from peace processes in Ireland, Nepal, Colombia, Kenya, India and the Middle East also illustrated women's varied approaches when they do join a process. Most examples seemed to suggest that women's agency is crucial in order to ensure gender sensitivity and inclusiveness in a process. In order for women to be included, it seems regrettably that it falls to women to keep advocating for this. Yet, as the overwhelming majority of mediators are men, it is therefore incumbent on men also to think more strategically and practically of ways to reach out and include women: as participants, advisers, co-mediators and lead mediators.

There was discussion around the essentialist attitude that women are inherently more peaceful than men, with references to the socialisation of men and women as playing a more significant and deeper role in this regard. The participant from Nepal noted that women made up an estimated 40 per cent of the People's Liberation Army. By joining the army, women saw the opportunity to fight and destroy the old structures of society in which they suffered feudal, economic, social and political oppression. However, although 50 per cent of the Maoist party's membership is female, and despite their active participation in fighting, women were not as robustly represented in the peace talks and few women hold senior positions in the party. This might be partly because women have been denied social and economic opportunities and their non-literacy rate is much higher than men's. Therefore women are structurally disadvantaged from assuming senior positions.

The multiple motivations to join fighting forces were also discussed. This was illustrated with an example from Northern Ireland, touching upon the transformative role that women – of all sides – played in advancing peace negotiations. This was partly motivated by their role as mothers, who did not want any more of their sons killed in the war.

A positive example of women's participation in a mediation process came from Kenya, where there was pressure to ensure that women were included within the mediation teams. The women were said to have been power brokers within their parties rather than merely token appointments to the team, and are regarded as having made substantive inputs during the talks. Strikingly, women participants played a key role in steering the position of the government and the tone of the talks, and were outspoken on the involvement of women in other areas of the process.

An example from the Middle East suggested that there are ways and means to empower women even in societies where this seems culturally not accepted. The participant emphasised that Islam, contrary to common belief, is not necessarily in conflict with ideas of women's rights, and that using the Koran in constructive ways affords many opportunities to strengthen women's position in Islamic societies.

A view that women should be included in mediation processes because they are 'smarter, kinder, more balanced, and socially more conscious and committed' drew debate, a key goal of the OSLO forum. Many participants rejected this view as a criterion for taking women's peacemaking capacities seriously, regarding it as reductionist. Clearly this is an area where more critical discussion and thinking is required in the peacemaking community.

Mediation processes tend to include only warring parties and armed groups, but peacemakers should also think of including groups fighting without arms. When determining the relevant

parties to include in a process, all ethnicities, ideologies and legitimate factions should be taken into account. This, it was argued, should naturally include women's perspectives as women represent significant parts of the community – whether or not they add something different from or perform better than men.

Supporting mediators

This session offered perspectives on the challenges mediators encounter in mediating and facilitating dialogue, and how to receive the appropriate level of support in doing so. Following a review of the type of mediation projects their respective institutions engage in, panellists quite candidly pointed to the practical difficulties they face in the actual management. In particular, the considerable amount of time spent overcoming administrative and logistical constraints, to the detriment of more substantial matters, was highlighted. This challenge was identified for both headquarters- and field-based mediators, and the deployment of appropriate administration and finance support cells was deemed of paramount importance.

Knowledge management in the field of best practice, lessons learned and tools was highlighted as an area in which support is needed. In particular, the fields of power-sharing and disarmament, elections and constitutional issues are recurrent topics in most mediation processes. In this regard, the panellists suggested that direct support to a mediation process could mainly take one of three forms: training for the mediators themselves, on process or thematic issues; deployment of thematic experts on short notice as seen from the UN Mediation Support Unit; and developing a roster of technical experts that chief mediators can call upon, including specific institution-building experts. In addition, workshops supported by NGOs were deemed a possible way to contribute to a more enabling environment for mediation.

While reviewing these options, panellists highlighted the need for funding flexibility to secure resources quickly. In particular, the delays in recruitment procedures when setting up a team were felt to be problematic, and it was suggested that a specific project should be initiated to recruit staff more rapidly.

Participants confirmed the need for administrative support for regional organisations involved in mediation, and extended this to communication and media. Whether chief mediators need specific intelligence or political analysis in the form of strategic analytical support on a said crisis was also debated. Participants also discussed the involvement of regional and neighbouring countries in mediation processes, and whether and when resorting to a non-regional mediator is more appropriate, e.g. to ensure neutrality.

Finally, participants discussed the need for enhanced organisational collaboration in the field of mediation. The issue of a common code of conduct for mediators was considered, and participants suggested that such a code could be a useful tool for mediation support in the short term.

The Mediators' Studio: Kenya

The Mediators' Studio has become one of the most popular features of the OSLO forum, in which a renowned journalist probes leading mediators or negotiators on their personal mediation experiences in an informal and intimate setting. This year's Mediators' Studio focused on the recent Kenya National Dialogue and Reconciliation process that has been widely hailed as a successful example of mediation preventing further violence. Skilfully interviewed by Roger Cohen, the Honourable Mutula Kilonzo, a member of the Government/Party of National Unity negotiating team, and the Honourable William Ruto, a member of the Orange Democratic Movement negotiating team, shared their experiences and lessons from the recent process.

Questioned on the extent to which the process was closely linked to Kofi Annan's personality, the two Ministers particularly stressed Annan's diplomatic talents and his tremendous support from the international community. In addition to skill, they emphasised that perception matters in politics and that it was equally important that Annan was from the region and was mandated by the African Union. Kilonzo and Ruto vividly recalled how the dynamics of the talks changed during the process from initial disagreement on who had won or lost the election to the pressing question of how to stop the violence and prevent the situation from further deteriorating.

The interviewees also reflected on how they realised amid the violence that they were no longer unconditionally representing the people on the streets, but were about to be perceived as and become representatives of a political elite as the talks changed the parties' perceptions of themselves and their role in the process. Both interviewees agreed that not all problems are solved in Kenya, especially now that internally displaced persons are starting to return and continue to face hostilities. Also, the issue of an amnesty remains a point of disagreement between the two sides. The discussions ahead are expected to be difficult as they cover more systemic constitutional issues, property rights and general inequality.

US foreign policy and mediation: Time for change?

US positions often determine the success or failure of international agreement on wide-ranging matters of global concern. This panel sought to examine what distinguishes US involvement in mediation, and whether a new administration can be expected to make a significant difference.

Opinions contributed on US involvement in international conflict covered the entire spectrum from 'outright unconstructive' to 'pivotal for success'. Many participants preferred to think of and rate US involvement in situation-specific terms. Looking back on their personal experiences, participants felt that the US had usually played a very important

role – for better or worse. In particular, restrictions imposed in the name of the ‘war on terror’ were repeatedly mentioned as having debilitating effects on international conflict resolution, limiting the credibility of those trying to resolve conflict and considerably hampering their work.

Nevertheless, the overall consensus was that the US has played and continues to play an important and often indispensable role in conflict zones around the world, most importantly in the Middle East. Regarding the Middle East, participants suggested that the US administration needs to rethink its strategy and acknowledge the fact that realities on the ground are changing. One participant suggested that it is no longer possible to disaggregate the individual components of the conflict, and expressed hope that the incoming administration will be open to new, more inclusive approaches. It would be difficult to think about a comprehensive peace agreement in the Middle East without major American engagement.

Among the positive examples of US foreign policy were US engagements in Cyprus and in Northern Ireland, as well as US efforts in helping China to establish itself as a serious player on the world scene. Also, US patience in supporting the Pakistan peace process was mentioned positively, even though some argued that these efforts were not made in a sustainable manner. Referring among other examples to the Bosnian experience, one participant was particularly appreciative of the way in which – unlike many Europeans, and also Indians – the US does not seek to impose its own model of democracy or federalism, but seeks somehow to support democratic solutions that are negotiated among those affected.

Another participant argued that the US is different from other mediators because it does not pretend to be impartial. The unique role of the US was said to be that of a strong facilitator. Participants agreed that in some situations the US would be the only actor in the world with enough leverage to act. However, one participant cautioned that the key to successful mediation is the process and keeping it alive, and expressed doubts about America’s patience for engaging in long and wearying processes.

Looking ahead, the discussion briefly reflected on the classic liberal-versus-conservative argument shown in the current electoral campaigns. While one sees a world of potential cooperation, the other sees a world of inherent conflict in which common concerns about the Middle East are being displayed as a new global struggle between democracies and authoritarian cultures. Past experience has shown that America tends to respond to disillusioning wartime experiences either by narrowing its definition of national interest and (temporarily) becoming less interested in trying to recreate the world in America’s image or by inspired calls for complete demilitarisation and vivid enthusiasm for outlawing war itself.

However, as an expert on US foreign policy put it: American ‘missionary seek’ is hard-wired and will never go away. Sometimes it will be more militaristic, sometimes less. One has to accept that America does have a national interest, and does have a national style when it comes to foreign policy.

Another side of mediation: Local actors doing it their way

This session examined experiences of local mediation efforts from Latin America, Asia and the Middle East in which the parties have chosen mediators who do not represent the usual, major international actors. Panellists and participants discussed the advantages and disadvantages of such low-key mediation efforts. In particular, local mediators' rapid adaptability and their capacity for discreet shuttle diplomacy between parties were mentioned.

The panellists felt that the work undertaken by these actors does not otherwise differ from other mediation efforts, but they underlined that the conditions under which local mediators strive differ from the framework in which major players operate. The panel stressed that refusing the involvement of major international players allows local actors to take responsibility for the process, and prevents them from hiding behind external actors.

India, for instance, was described as a traditionally isolationist country reluctant to become involved in international mediation. However, this position seems to be evolving. For example, India is said to have participated constructively in the process in Nepal, and the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP, nationalist party) is seen as more willing to engage with internationals than previously. Also, civil society organisations tried to find alternative solutions to the India–Pakistan issue and it is envisaged that a potential framework could be inspired by the Northern Ireland experience.

On the other hand, it was felt that the main reason for the international community not to be present in Colombia was less a matter of strategy, but rather a result of the lack of agreement within Colombia about the nature of the problem. In the Middle East, six agreements have been recently signed without major international involvement. This change of actors was described as a deliberate move into a new direction in response to the growing sense that the Western vision cannot solve all problems, and the need to work on a different level with different players.

Panellists and participants further discussed the parameters of such mediation efforts and stressed that local mediation can be formal and that informal mediation is not necessarily local. While participants agreed that local mediation was extremely useful, it was felt that local actors could not replace international implementation and that ways should be sought to bring in the international community. Local actors should take the lead, but be able to draw on support from international actors right from the beginning rather than only during post-conflict resolution stages.

Talking guns and violence in peace processes: A farewell to arms?

Weapons are invariably used as bargaining chips in peace processes. The control of them, and the aspirations and livelihoods of those holding them, are complex and contentious

aspects of peacemaking and peacebuilding. The panel convened individuals with diverse perspectives from Haiti, Northern Ireland and Afghanistan on the challenges of negotiating disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR), violence reduction, security-sector reform (SSR) and weapons control in peace processes.

Panellists highlighted the unique circumstances in each situation, providing vivid examples of the core issues at stake: identity, power, authority and livelihood. These concerns are often relegated to a technical status within peace processes, and the panellists argued that they should be better understood by those mediating peace negotiations in order to agree robust measures to reduce the misuse of weapons and integrate fighting forces sustainably into communities, viable armies and police forces.

For all their differences, the examples of Haiti, Northern Ireland and Afghanistan highlight the blurry boundaries between peacemaking and peacebuilding. The lack of a peace agreement (or meaningful agreement) to guide the process left the negotiation of security concerns for the peace-implementation phase, stressing the long-term nature of repairing and rebuilding security sectors and transforming fighting forces. Beyond challenging those involved, this straddling of both emergency and development categories also creates problems of secure funding for such activities with short-, medium- and long-term dimensions as they typically fall into neither funding stream very clearly.

Some discussants emphasised the synergies – or current lack thereof – between DDR, SSR, armed-violence reduction and weapons management. In addition, the perils of a fixed approach to sequencing were raised, indicative of a growing recognition that each context demands an individual approach.

Participants agreed that substantive discussions to agree on and plan for integration measures are critical and should be given more attention by the parties. It was felt that the technical focus on disarmament and demobilisation frequently obscures more careful consideration of this element, leading to resentment among fighting forces and inappropriate options for return to civilian life or entry into security institutions. The dangers of ignoring or side-stepping militias and gangs as non-fighting forces in the classic sense was also touched upon, as these groups can pose a significant impediment to restoring confidence in public security.

Discussions also focused on the value of robust conflict assessments to inform negotiations on a range of security matters and, crucially, integration possibilities. In most situations accurate or semi-accurate analysis on security matters is scarce and/or politicised. However, in the last decade, improved strategies have been developed to account for weapons stockpiles, holders of guns, motivations and options for integration and public security. Circumventing weak connections between practice and policy on this principle is an area in which mediators and their advisers can be instrumental.

Mediating regional dynamics in the Middle East

Until recently the road to peace in the Middle East was deemed to lead through either Baghdad or Jerusalem. Following the 2006 Lebanon war, the perceptions of many in the West have been rerouted and Iran has been increasingly regarded as crucial to peace in the Middle East.

Many speakers argued that policy makers and mediators should certainly consider Iran in their decisions and actions to address the Middle East, but that this should be done differently and in a less obsessive and aggressive way. The threat of military action should negotiations fail is always implicit, but explicitly pointing to that threat is a mistake. Interestingly, in the case of Iran, the burden of proof that diplomatic options are not yet exhausted lies with those opposing military action.

Participants agreed that this burden of proof should be reversed and cautioned that addressing the conflicts in the Middle East will be more difficult if Iran is weakened. However, while Iran is rightfully considered a pivotal player given its influence in the region, not all alliances are necessarily and mutually unconditional. While some links are deep and strategic, such as the relations between Iran and Hezbollah, others alliances are more ad hoc, temporary or represent marriages of convenience – as between Syria and Iran.

Many participants agreed that this focus on Iran is a major weakness of US policy in the region. For example, a rapprochement between the US and Iran should not be a precondition for initiating change in other conflicts. The insistence not to approach Syria on its relations with Israel unless Syria severs its ties to Iran was felt to be as counterproductive as the US failure to support Palestinian reconciliation rather than focusing on sidelining groups such as Fatah.

Participants agreed that the region cannot afford to abandon mediation efforts. However, while local efforts seem to be successful, the resolution of bigger issues continues to depend on a change in US policy. One participant described the current regional initiatives welcome place holders, but no substitute for US initiatives. The Israel–Syria process in particular needs to be supported, as Israel is unlikely to show genuine interest without US involvement.

Some participants stressed that a solution for the Middle East was not about changing behaviour, but about changing regimes. The Arab world, however, was not inclined towards an Iran-style regime overthrow given its profound deal-making culture and the fact that most conflicts are triggered by domestic indignities.

The single most important and defining change in the Middle East in recent years has been the strengthening of defiance and resistance of large parts of the population against their own governments as well as against the perceived foreign occupation. However, one participant questioned the description of defiance as a tool for groups like Hezbollah to mobilise change within society. While not all were expecting the US to save the Middle East, many would

realise the need for US presence to find ways to peaceful coexistence with the US and the West to sustain whatever solution will be found.

Conclusions: OSLO forum 2008 and beyond

Once more the OSLO forum has provided a valuable learning and networking experience for mediators and actors in peace processes. The coffee breaks, unscheduled meetings and conversations on the side proved to be just as important as the insights and experiences shared in the scheduled sessions.

This year's forum was by far the biggest to date, and the background of its participants the most varied yet. The mix of active mediators, war correspondents, analysts and researchers, conflict parties and officials from governments, regional and sub-regional organisations and the United Nations, offered a colourful variety of experiences in conflict resolution. The presence of former conflict parties in particular was perceived very positively, and many felt that this substantially revived the discussions of the likeminded and offered new – if at times critical – insights from the other side of the mediation process.

The OSLO forum is rooted in a deep belief in the value of shared experiences and we look forward to your feedback, suggestions and ideas throughout the year to keep the OSLO forum and related gatherings stimulating and surprising, as well as relevant and useful. The next OSLO forum is planned for June 2009, with a related meeting focusing on African conflicts and actors scheduled to take place in Africa in March 2009.

OSLO forum 2008 Agenda

Tuesday 24 June	Wednesday 25 June		Thursday 26 June	
Arrivals and bi-laterals	08.00–09.00 Optional Breakfast Sessions Somalia; Nepal; Cyprus		08.00–09.00 Optional Breakfast Sessions Afghanistan; Lebanon; Abkhazia	
	09.30–11.00 Talking While Shooting: Changing Attitudes to Dialogue in Iraq	09.30–11.00 Breaking the vicious circle: Darfur and Chad	09.30–11.00 US foreign policy and mediation: Time for change?	
	11.30–13.00 The case for engagement A panel on the prospects of mediation with Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs		11.30–13.00 Another side of mediation: Local actors doing it their way	11.30–13.00 Talking guns and violence in peace processes: A farewell to arms?
	13.00–15.00 Lunch Keynote address on Myanmar by Lord Malloch Brown, United Kingdom Minister for Africa, Asia and the United Nations		13.00–14.30 Informal lunch	
	15.00–16.30 Trends in conflict resolution: What do the numbers tell?	15.00–16.30 Tricks of the trade: Gender sensitivity as a mediation tool	14.30–16.00 Mediating regional dynamics in the Middle East Followed by closing remarks	
17.00–19.00 Keynote speech by the former President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mr Mohammad Khatami	17.00–18.00 Supporting Mediators		Open time for bi-laterals 19.00 Boat excursion on the Oslo Fjord with dinner	
	18.30–19.30 The Mediator's Studio: Kenya			
19.45 Reception and formal opening dinner	19.45 Informal dinner			

OSLO forum 2008

Final list of participants

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Ambassador Reza Alborzi

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Dr Samir Altaqi

Director, Orient Centre for International Studies

Mr Jon Lee Anderson

Reporter, The New Yorker

Mr Jean Arnault

Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Georgia and Head of Mission

Mr Peter Beinart

Senior Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations

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Minister for Women, Children and Social Welfare, Government of Nepal; Member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party Nepal/ Maoist

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Director General, Toledo International Centre for Peace

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Research Coordinator on Urban Violence, Research Institute ISER, Rio de Janeiro; Executive Director, Viva Rio

The Right Honourable Joe Clark

Professor of Practice, Centre for Developing Area Studies, McGill University; Former Prime Minister of Canada

Ms Sarah Cliffe

Director for Strategy and Operations, East Asia and Pacific Region, World Bank

Mr Richard Cockett

Africa Editor, The Economist

Mr Roger Cohen

Editor at Large, International Herald Tribune; Columnist, International Herald Tribune and New York Times

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Chief, UN Policy Planning and Mediation Support Unit, Department of Political Affairs

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Strategy Director, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue

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Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General and Head of the Office of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for West Africa

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Director, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs; Special Adviser to the UN Secretary-General for conflict resolution

Ambassador Kai Eide

Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Afghanistan and head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)

Mr Gareth Evans

President, International Crisis Group

Ambassador Marika Fahlén

Special Adviser for the Horn of Africa, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Mr Hans Jacob Frydenlund

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Mr Jonas Gahr Støre

Minister of Foreign Affairs of Norway

Mr Ufuk Gökçen

Adviser to the Secretary-General, Organisation of the Islamic Conference

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Ambassador Jon Hanssen-Bauer

Special Envoy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway

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Vice-President (Multilateral Affairs), International Crisis Group

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Secretary-General, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

Ambassador Swanee Hunt

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Ambassador George Iacovou

Special Representative of the Greek Cypriot Leader

Ms Karin Jestin

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The Rt Hon Lord Malloch Brown

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Dr Joyce Neu

Team leader, UN Standby Team of Mediation Experts

Mr Thomas Nordanstad

Documentary filmmaker

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Legal Practitioner; Former Chair of the Steering Committee of the World Movement for Democracy

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Senior Adviser, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue; Former UN Under Secretary-General for Political Affairs

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Deputy Head Section IV, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Switzerland

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