

'Parties very serious about sustainable settlement'

*Among the critical figures mediating the peace agreement between the Indonesian government and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) is Martti Ahtisaari, chairman of the Crisis Management Initiative (CMI) in Helsinki and a former president of Finland. He sounded elated in a telephone interview with The Jakarta Post contributor **Yenni Kwok** shortly before the Indonesian and GAM delegates signed the historic peace accord. The following is an excerpt of the interview:*

Question: What has been the most difficult part of the process? How did you succeed in convincing both parties to iron out their differences?

Answer: Everything has been difficult. We agreed that nothing is agreed until everybody agrees. And nothing should go to the public until it is agreed upon.

No mediator can force people to agree. It only works if the parties have a genuine desire for a settlement. We always emphasized a peaceful solution for the dignity of all. There are no losers in this process, and this is the attitude we took.

Who have been the most important players in the process?

The leaders of both delegations, Hamid Awaluddin of the Indonesian government and Malik Mahmud of GAM, have very important roles. They are not only leading the delegations, but they are also entrusted by the Indonesian and Acehnese people.

How did you, a Finnish diplomat, play a mediating role in a conflict so far away?

I was involved in peace processes in Africa and Europe (Namibia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Northern Ireland). In the late 1990s, after the Kosovo conflict, some approaches were made. But I was still the president of Finland. It was just a time constraint, I was not a free agent. The Kosovo conflict was different, because I was there as Finland held the presidency of the European Union (EU), and thus I represented the EU. The mediations lasted for only less than two months.

Last year, I was approached by a Finnish man who had worked in Indonesia in the 1980s, and he asked whether I was interested. His name is Juha Christensen and he has contacts with both the Indonesian government and Acehnese leaders. We approached both sides, and the first contact with the Indonesian representatives started seriously before Christmas last year, before the tsunami

disaster.

What was it like mediating in the Aceh conflict compared to the other peace processes you were involved with?

Every peace process has been different. The (Geneva-based) Henri Dunant Centre made another effort before (in 2002), and they had negotiated the cessation of hostilities agreement and we had contacts with them before. We agreed to mediate only if the parties were serious in finding a solution. My hands are often full, and I do not want to waste my time. But I could see that everybody was serious, and the new government of Indonesia was eager to find a settlement.

How did the EU get to be involved?

It was agreed to from the beginning. The Indonesian side rejected the United Nations because they regarded Aceh as an internal issue. Both sides agreed to having ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) as a regional organization. Then it was also agreed to involve another regional organization, and it was the EU. The EU was already involved in the Middle East and Africa, but this will be their first mission in Asia (to monitor the implementation of the peace agreement) and I am very pleased about it. It is a very positive and courageous move.

What are you doing to avoid the breakdown of the peace agreement, considering how fragile it could be?

We have discussed the monitoring (of the agreement) with experienced people and I hope it will help. But the commitment of the parties is also very crucial. After following the process I am realistic that the parties are very serious about having a sustainable settlement to the conflict.

What is the role of the CMI after the deal is signed?

The CMI is pretty much out of the process, but we will still follow closely what is going on. I tend to see the CMI's role in this conflict like that of a godfather or godmother, or somebody who guides the ship coming into the harbor. We have a moral responsibility to follow the process carefully.

What are the highlights of your career as a diplomat and a statesman? Do you enjoy international diplomacy more than domestic issues?

The EU presidency is by far the most important, and also the fact that Finland became an EU member during my presidency. For many among the political elite in my country, I am considered to be strange. My political career is largely international, though I did many domestic things (during the presidency), i.e.

tackling the employment issue and advancing the interests of the Finnish business community. I am an independent soul and I may not be liked by anybody. I was pleased with my presidential term, but I never considered running again.

This (Aceh) peace mission is very important for me. I am very pleased with this peace process. I am very proud that we could find solution in a short time. Such things seldom happen.

What is your plan after mediating the Aceh peace process?

I will be doing different types of negotiations. This Sunday, I am going on a mission to Eritrea and Ethiopia as the special envoy of the UN secretary-general for the humanitarian crisis in the Horn of Africa. I know Kofi Annan very well, we were colleagues when both of us were working at the UN Secretariat.

There might be requests to mediate a peace process in the future. But I am not really looking around. It is better that people come to see me.

How can CMI sustain its role as a peacemaker with only having 13 full-time staff members?

We don't need a big organization. Right now I am working with young, competent and hard-working people. Most of them are women, though I do not want to influence your thoughts that men create conflicts and women make peace (laughing).

The interview was published in The Jakarta Post daily, 16 August 2005