



[GUEST COMMENTARY]

MARTTI AHTISAARI

PEACE:

LET YOUTH LEAD THE WAY



Looking back at my work for peace and reconciliation over the past 30 years, particularly in places like Namibia, Kosovo and Aceh, always fills me with joy because I think of the changes that peace has made in the daily lives of so many people. It is when their faith in the future begins.

My commitment to these issues began when I was very young and living with my family in Viipuri, a city along Finland's border. War broke out as the result of an agreement between Stalin's Soviet Union and Hitler's Germany, and hundreds of thousands of us were forced to flee to other parts of Finland, becoming refugees in our own country. My parents and relatives talked often about how difficult it was to leave the family house and farm and restart our lives. It made me realize how much I had in common with others around the world who have faced similar threats and how much this early experience contributed to what I've tried to do in my own life.

I am pleased and honored to have helped resolve conflicts in a number of countries. Yet we know that peace agreements themselves can only provide the framework for a new beginning. The most important question we must ask ourselves is how to prevent future wars and conflict. How do you integrate former combatants back into society? How do you help ordinary citizens who have lost their professions start up small enterprises that thrive? How do you guarantee that the bad habits that rise up in times of war and violence, like the abusive behavior of soldiers and police officers, will change? How do you make sure that more people — especially young people — get decent jobs? And when does faith in the future return?

“IT IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT THAT THIS YOUNGER GENERATION BECOMES ACTIVE IN CIVIC LIFE.”

Many forces help to improve conditions in some of these post-conflict regions. An important one is the emergence of a strong youth movement. The older generation often can't understand what went wrong in their country or how one can change to embrace a different kind of future. Since young people don't carry the ballast of the older generation, they can offer a new and positive vision. That's why they must have a say in their own lives and in the direction of their communities, their country and the world around them.

I think of young leaders like Erion Veliaj, who has done so much in his country of Albania to engage citizens in building up a democratic society — by giving them a voice in demanding change, reforming the system and fighting corruption. Whenever I hear their voices and see what they've been able to accomplish, I know I will have a good day.

In the late 1990s, I was determined to help those living in the post-conflict region of the Balkans to rebuild their societies. One of the most critical needs facing them was soaring unemployment, which was particularly high among the region's youth. I also saw it was necessary to bring together young people from different backgrounds so they could work collectively to improve their futures. The urgency to address some of these challenges was behind our efforts to establish the Balkan Children and Youth Foundation (BCYF), with the support of the International Youth Foundation and a group of civic, business and government leaders from across the Balkans and beyond. I'm proud that BCYF has played an important role in this region over the years, both in terms of strengthening young people's voices and providing them with the training and skills they need to get decent jobs and be productive. We must continue to do much more to support young people to be part of the solution, including providing them with the opportunity for entrepreneurship and giving them the mentoring and funds they need to start their own businesses.

I've devoted years of my professional life to development issues, particularly in Africa, and have seen how social and economic reforms can lessen tensions and help build progress. And I can't overstate how critical youth employment is to this development and reconstruction process. There are one billion young people — a horrendous number — who are looking for work and have nothing to do. I believe that one of my responsibilities today — especially now as a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize — is to bring greater public attention to this global crisis.

Communities where young people don't feel they have



a future and don't have any hope can become breeding grounds for crime and instability. If these challenges go unmet, new conflicts will flare up, and we will lose another generation to war.

So it is extremely important, particularly in the early stages of reconstruction, that this younger generation becomes active in civic life and has a positive role in the development and governance of their countries.

I will never forget the time I attended a youth leadership forum in Croatia and listened to a group of youngsters from across that region — whose countries were quite recently at war with each other — sing old songs together. Scenes like this, when those from different religious and political backgrounds begin to explore what they have in common, allow us to envision a new kind of leadership in the world. I'm pleased, too, when I see thousands of young people in Africa addressing another urgent global challenge — the spread of HIV/AIDS — by teaching each other how to change their behaviors and stay healthy. They are taking responsibility for their own lives and setting a powerful example for others.

I have always been an optimist. Wars and conflict are not inevitable, but everyone must be engaged in creating the conditions for lasting peace. Even during this current global financial crisis, I call on all governments to remain committed to investing in the eradication of poverty. That is the most effective way to combat violence and hatred in the long run. The business community needs to do more to close the gaps of inequality, which only deepen existing divides between countries and people. NGOs must expand their role in developing strong democratic societies. And every country must remove the obstacles that keep young people from becoming the active and productive citizens they need to be. They remain my greatest hope for the future. **Y**

Martti Ahtisaari, the former President of Finland, is the recipient of the 2008 Nobel Peace Prize. He played a key role in establishing the Balkan Children and Youth Foundation (BCYF) with the International Youth Foundation in 2000. As BCYF's Chairman of the Board (through 2008), Mr. Ahtisaari met regularly with Balkan youth leaders, including Muhamed Mesic (below), seen here on a panel with the President at a BCYF conference in Croatia.

