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Interview by Special Envoy Martti Ahtisaari to three Kosovo-Serb media, in Pristina

Following is the transcript of an interview given by Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for the future Status for Kosovo Martti Ahtisaari to three K-Serb media – TV-Most, Radio Contact+ and Kim Radio, on 24 August.

Zeljko Turdusic, Executive Chief of Radio Contact plus and the Correspondent of Tanjug Agency from Kosovo: Mr. Ahtisaari what have you requested from the Unity Team today ? And, on your meetings yesterday and today, are there indications that they will be flexible regarding the number of Serbian municipalities with majority populations?

Martti Ahtisaari: First of all I have to explain the background for my visit because this is a continuation of the work, which we started in February in Vienna.

When I chaired the meeting on the Status discussions I presented a work plan to the parties. And, my visit here is part of that exercise. In other words we have been discussion issues, which have to do with decentralization, with the administration, and we touched issues concerning the cultural heritages and religions sites, and issues that have to do with community rights. And also we have briefly discussed the economic issues. And of course under these topics there is some enormous amount of details because we are now approaching the phase where we have to see how close are the parties on these Status-neutral issues. Because I promised in Vienna in that meeting where I presented my workplan that we will continue as long as I see that we can bring the parties closer together. But I am not in the position, not today or tomorrow, to go into details of this because we have to keep in mind how one runs these negotiations, because in the best of circumstances nothing is agreed before everything is agreed. So, only then when I am in the position to present something to the Secretary-General and Security Council, hopefully later on this year, can we actually start seeing what kind of details have emerged out of this exercise. But we had a good meeting. We were sitting there for the last three hours.

Contact + : Are there any indications that the Albanians will be more flexible regarding Serbian majority municipalities in Kosovo.

Martti Ahtisaari: I think both sides have to be flexible; it doesn't help if you only look at [one party]. I understand I am now here in Pristina, but the important thing is

that we can pursue these discussions with both parties. And I think it is important for me to say that I think there is a realisation here - and hopefully in Belgrade too- that this is a time when difficult decisions have to be made.

Anna Todorovic editor in informative programme of Television Most in Zvecan: You said you came here to realise how close the two sides are. It is obvious that they are far apart. What will you do to bring them closer together?

Martti Ahtisaari: First of all let's clarify the situation. We have basically two series of talks. One which we started in February, which I have always called Status-neutral issues that need to be settled no matter whatever the status might be. And then you have the actual Status discussions, for which we have had only one round, which I chaired in Vienna. On that latter round in Vienna on the Status, you are right: the parties are very far from each other, one demanding independence, and the other one saying autonomy is being offered.

But on these talks that we started in February in Vienna we have made progress. We have discussed what the competencies are in a decentralized Kosovo, what sort of municipalities there would be in the end of this process where Serbs would be in majority. How do we guarantee that in the end of this exercise all people in Kosovo can have a better life than they have today? Majority *and* minority. And that includes also the future presence, which is different from the present one when we have KFOR and UNMIK, what is the future role of the international community in Kosovo? Because a role the international community will have.

And I'll give you further examples. How do we protect the cultural heritage and religious sites for instance? So there is an enormous amount of practical issues, for which we have to find a solution. And we are continuously moving and I hope that fairly soon in September... My experts are even here today discussing and elsewhere as well, we have to travel to both Pristina and Belgrade, so this is a continuous process. And on these issues there comes the time, when I have the responsibility on behalf of the International community to draw the conclusion: does it make any sense to continue or do I have to draw a conclusion that we have to make our own proposal, which may be somewhere in between of the parties? On these issues that I have just mentioned to you, not on the Status. We are not yet there. This process continues. And my colleagues will be visiting Belgrade as well, and my next meeting is going to be at the end of next week in Vienna with the Contact Group.

Zivojin Rokočević, Editor-in-Chief, KIM radio and Glas Juga: I must say there has been a lot of difficulty in this process on decentralization. Why is there no democracy to create this kind of new municipalities in Kosovo? Can you tell us more about this potential, what kind of potential it is?

Martti Ahtisaari: I think when it comes to administration and governments in any place there is a continuing discussion in all over the world: what are the issues that have to be decided centrally, what are the issues can be delegated towards the municipalities? First of all this is a very general question. How much independence will for instance the Kosovo Serbs municipalities have in running their education and health services. How many new Serb majority municipalities there are going to be in the end of this exercise? How are the contacts between these municipalities and

Belgrade to be administered? Because as you know funding for health and education services has been coming from Belgrade at least in the existing municipalities where there is a Serb majority. And all this has to be discussed despite the fact that there is not much terribly much confidence between the different communities in the society.

Kim Radio: My question was about potential. Why is there a lack about potential which will provide people with basic services?

Martti Ahtisaari: First of all I think in any society the economic prosperity is the number one reason. How much the government, any government can deliver when it comes to the needs of the society. That's why I think the membership of Kosovo in the International financial institutions is of vital importance. That is I think recognised by everybody, including Belgrade. Because if you want to have loans those are the institutions you have to deal with, and through membership in those institutions will bring some credibility also and trust for the private sector investors to invest.

Kim Radio: We have heard all this, but we must consider common people from municipalities, what the different communities are offering? And what are they offering to you? I am talking about the potential of the people in the field, who are offering something.

Martti Ahtisaari: You mean: the different communities?

Kim Radio: Yes

Martti Ahtisaari: That's what these talks are all about. For instance the size of the municipalities, the competencies of the municipalities. This has to be decided in these talks. So these are very much issues that have direct bearing on the life of people, wherever they are. Whether they are Kosovo-Albanians or Kosovo Serbs. And I mention every time when I speak about ordinary people in any society: what are they interested in? They wanted to be treated well by police and courts. And also I think if I would have to describe you what all these talks are basically aiming at, then I would say that the main aim is to create conditions where both the majority and minorities, - all minorities particularly Kosovo Serbs - can have a better life in this society.

And what these talks are all about is to bring the framework within which we can actually achieve that. I have no illusions I have been doing this sort of work for such a long time that it will take a long, long time before we have a multi-ethnic well-functioning society. Whatever the status may be it will take years. But the start has to be made. And that's what we are trying to do. And lets hope that in the end of the day we can say, yes, now there is a new start. But in order to reach that there is a lot of guarantees that needs to be done, both within the Constitution and otherwise.

Contact + : Mr. Ahtisaari I would ask you to be a little more brief and concise in your answers. Kosovo Albanians are often considering decentralization as supplement of independence, what is your opinion on this?

Martti Ahtisaari: I think decentralization is a part of good governance in any country. Because I think that all those decisions that can be made in municipalities, they should be able to do that. That's the pre-condition for good governance.

Contact+: Lipjan and Priluzje from the point of sustainability are fulfilling conditions to become municipalities. Will you give your efforts to reach that goal?

Martti Ahtisaari: I am in no position at this stage to say what the end of these talks is going to be, because we are still far from the situation that we can tell you that these are going to be the municipalities. And I hope you understand that it would not help at all in our discussions if we would start saying: “now we have agreed on this and now we agreed on that”, in the end we wouldn’t agree on nothing. I sympathise that it doesn’t make your life much easier, but I have to try to find a solution.

TV Most: Can you tell us what is the answer you can give since the Albanian side is offering five municipalities and the Serbian side is offering a lot larger number?

Martti Ahtisaari: I think like in all negotiations it’s not surprising that people come with different views when we start a process. I think it would be very surprising if they would come with the same number immediately. We have to discuss what are the principles under which these matters should be looked at, get agreement on that and then start looking whether there are other constraints why that principle cannot be followed in every single case. And I hope that this process will bring the parties closer together and we can actually see - if not fully eye-to-eye – we can see very much closer than we were when we started.

But may I say that I want in the end of this exercise which I am involved at the moment, to create such conditions in this place that no one needs to leave Kosovo and those who want to come back will have a chance to return. And if we fail in that then we have failed in our task. And then I must appeal to all communities that we need co-operation and I realise that it’s easier said than done after what has happened in this society as well.

Kim Radio: I would like to ask you. According to the information I have, parallel to these talks Pristina and Belgrade are discussing modalities on division of Kosovo. Are you prepared for such possible agreement and what will you do if Serbs and Albanians agree on a division of Kosovo?

Martti Ahtisaari: I regard this sort of alternative highly unlikely. You know the guiding principles of the Contact Group which includes four permanent members of the Security Council, four out of five. Before I even started they made it very clear that partition would not be accepted. Because it is not only what the parties might want, and I don’t think that the parties even want that.

It’s not surprising that there may be individuals here and there, and you people will write about it and speculate it as well, or speak about it. But I am not aware of any discussions and I would definitely not support that. Because if the final aim in this exercise in the years to come is to have a well-functioning, democratic, multi-ethnic society then separation and partition is not the way out to reach that. I sincerely hope that we all agree that what we need in the Balkans is a new beginning.

Kim Radio: What would that new beginning be based on?

Martti Ahtisaari: Based on the fact that what has happened in the past we cannot ignore that. And I think we all have to live with the past but we have to recognise that even if things went wrong in the past there is still a possibility, if people and different communities want so, to start building a new relationship. And I have seen that it is possible. I have seen it elsewhere in the world. I just visited briefly a week ago Indonesia and Aceh and I saw that despite the fact that people had been fighting for 30 years, they were now seeing eye-to-eye on some very difficult issues and trying to look for solutions. It's still in the beginning there, it has only been one year, but it simply re-enforces my argument that people can, despite all the grievances that they may have they can make a new beginning.

Contact + : Mr. Ahtisaari, when can we accept continuation of status talks? And are these talks somewhat conditioned by success on the technical talks?

Martti Ahtisaari: We need only in the sense that we need to solve these technical non-Status, or Status-neutral, talks. We have to solve these practical problems we are now tackling. And then the time will come when we have to address the status issues as well. At the moment I don't have any other timeframe except 2006, as the Contact Group has said. So time is running out, that's why we are working so hard with my colleagues to get these issues solved.

TV Most: In order to achieve your goal that you mentioned to enable people to stay here and people who want to return to come back, we should fulfil standards which at the moment are not being fulfilled. As I am aware in September you will submit a new report to the UNSC. What will that report contain regarding fulfilment of standards and could we expect continuation of talks?

Martti Ahtisaari: Let's clarify this: the Special Representative will report on the implementation of Standards. That is a division of labour. I will brief the Security Council on what we were doing and what we intend to do. Because I have a continuous dialogue with the Security Council and now it is particularly important because there will be a fair number of Foreign Ministers present. Because it is very important to keep the Security Council informed of the process, because they are the ones in the end that have to make the decision, not me.

Thank you very much. It was good to talk you.

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