

**Joint Belgian-Norwegian Seminar on
“Peace, Mediation and Reconciliation”,
on the occasion of the Norwegian State visit to Brussels,
21 May 2003**

Key Note Speech by Foreign Minister Jan Petersen

Your Majesty,
Your Royal Highness,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Norway and Belgium have been working together as close allies and partners for many years. Both our countries are working for peace, in different places and in different contexts. Our approaches vary, and I welcome this opportunity to exchange views and experiences.

Smaller countries are not in a position to impose its views on others. However, smaller countries can sometimes offer useful advice and contribute to creative solutions where multilateral efforts have not produced results or others have failed. This is illustrated by the way in which Belgium plays an active and supportive role in the Great Lakes region.

Norway for its part is actively engaged in efforts to promote peace and reconciliation, human rights and democracy in areas of the world as far apart as Sri Lanka, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America.

I spent most of last week in Sri Lanka trying to breathe new life into the stalled negotiations between the Government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. No major breakthrough was achieved, but progress was made. We will continue our facilitation efforts. Hopefully the LTTE will soon return to the negotiating table.

Norway first made the headlines as a peace facilitator when Israel and the PLO signed the Oslo agreement in 1993. Middle East peace has been a high priority in Norwegian foreign policy for many years. Despite the setbacks resulting from the latest horrendous acts of violence we can still identify three recent factors that have improved the prospects for peace in the region:

- First, Saddam Hussein’s regime has been removed, and with it one of the biggest regional threats to Israel’s security.
- Second, the appointment of Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas and his new government has given the Palestinian reform process, in which Norway is actively involved, a new and promising impetus.
- Third, the Quartet has presented its road map for peace, which aims at the establishment by 2005 of a Palestinian state, living side by side with Israel, in peace and security.

Norway is keen to support the implementation of the road map, including through our chairmanship of the international donor group known as the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee. The road map gives the Parties, and the international community, a window of opportunity to restart a political process. We must make use of this opportunity, and not lose sight of the long-term need to come to grips with this tragic conflict. Those who seek to prevent dialogue and political process through terrorism should not be allowed to set the agenda.

I have been asked why Norway is so involved in attempts to facilitate reconciliation around the world. The answer is complex, but some key elements can be identified.

Broadly speaking, as a small country we are committed to a world order based on international co-operation, international law and freedom from human suffering, unrest and war. Helping to promote these ideals is ultimately in the interest of any small country – and in the wider interest of the security of all states and individuals.

During the Cold War the main responsibility for keeping world peace lay with the UN and large regional organisations. Today we are witnessing a number of conflicts that instead call for a rather low-intensity approach in order to build peace and reconciliation.

Most of today's conflicts have a strong asymmetric element – states against rebels. In such situations international governmental organisations will at times have only limited effectiveness since they are not designed to deal with intra-state problems.

Norwegian NGOs have over several decades gained wide international experience. As a result, we have a number of contact points with non-governmental actors in many countries. Such contacts can create the basis for participation in peace and reconciliation processes and, in situations where we are well placed to contribute, we believe we have a responsibility to do so.

Norway has for quite some time been a fairly large provider of humanitarian assistance and an active partner in international development co-operation. This stems from a desire to help alleviate human suffering and promote human security. However, as I have indicated, we believe we are in a position to contribute in a broader sense than just financially. Economic assistance can never replace political solutions to conflicts that are by their nature political. If we can provide political support to efforts to create peace, we are supporting the very same objectives that we are pursuing through our humanitarian assistance, development co-operation, and dialogues on human rights.

Our role is also made possible by the fact that Norway is a small country that is seen as impartial, without historical or vested interests. Furthermore, we have a level of political stability and consensus that enables us to participate in such processes, regardless of which government is in power in Norway. Because of this, we can have a long-term perspective in our involvement.

Let me, however, make it very clear that peace can only be achieved by the parties involved. It cannot be imposed from abroad. Unless the government and people of a country are genuinely willing to confront the problems that are causing the conflict, there is little that even the best informed and most benevolent outsider can achieve. Norway has never been in a position, or indeed wanted, to act as a forceful mediator using coercive means to persuade the parties to move along the road to peace.

And, even when we succeed in our individual endeavours, let us not forget that efforts to promote peace and reconciliation are stronger and more persuasive when the international community is working together. This is why the deep divisions in the international community resulting from the Iraq crisis were cause for such concern. For a variety of reasons the Security Council did not manage to reach agreement at the crucial moment. The United Nations and the Security Council were weakened and the cause of multilateralism suffered a temporary setback.

Now we need to restore confidence in the multilateral approach. We should focus on the most urgent challenges ahead. Concerted action is still needed.

We must strengthen the United Nations and its ability to promote and uphold peace and security. The upcoming session of the UN General Assembly will be an important opportunity to regain the momentum. We in Norway look forward to working with allies like Belgium as well as with other countries to that end.

Early adoption of a broad resolution on post-war Iraq, including lifting the sanctions, would be a crucial first step towards re-establishing the unity, authority and credibility of the Security Council. And, of course, in Norway's opinion the UN should play a central role in humanitarian and reconstruction efforts in Iraq.

The Iraq crisis did not only cause tension in the United Nations. It also led to divisions within the North Atlantic Alliance – divisions that ran down the middle of the Atlantic, and also affected European allies.

Now we are happy to note a common resolve among allies to put disunity behind us, to re-establish cohesion and look to the future.

A strong NATO is dependent on strong transatlantic ties. For Norway it is vital that the ties across the Atlantic are maintained and strengthened through our joint effort to ensure that NATO remains an effective tool for peace and security. The new threats to our security require a broadening of NATO's focus. We must be prepared to counter threats originating from outside NATO's traditional core areas.

In Iraq it is now of paramount importance to establish a stable security environment and improvements in the infrastructure for humanitarian aid and reconstruction. Like others, Norway has been looking into ways of making a contribution to that end.

Norway stands ready to contribute to the planned stabilisation force in the UK area of responsibility in Iraq, provided certain conditions are met.

We continue to favour a key role for the United Nations not only with regard to humanitarian efforts and reconstruction, but also with regard to providing a mandate for a stabilisation force.

We are, therefore, pleased to see that developments in New York are moving in the direction of Security Council recognition of the need for contributions by States to a stabilisation force.

At the same time, we recognise the urgency of the situation and are aware that the adoption of any UN mandate is likely to take time. In the meantime we must take care of the civilian population's pressing need for a stable and secure environment.

I am confident that the exchange of experiences and views during this seminar will be a fruitful one, and that it will be of benefit to both our countries in their efforts to promote peace and reconciliation around the world.

We look forward to continuing our close co-operation with Belgium on meeting the challenges to peace in the time ahead.

Thank you for your attention.