

Conference on Crisis Management and Information Technology "Towards Interoperability in Crisis Management"

Helsinki, 11 – 14 September 2003

Welcome Remarks by President Martti Ahtisaari, Chairman, Crisis Management Initiative

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Participants

I would like to warmly welcome you to Helsinki and to this conference, "Towards Interoperability in Crisis Management," on behalf of the organisers: the Crisis Management Initiative and the United States Institute of Peace, both of which have been working during the past years particularly on how to improve co-operation and information sharing in the field operations.

This event continues the earlier work of both these organizations in finding innovative yet practical solutions to problems that are hindering the efficient response to conflicts. I know that there are many who have misgivings about this sort of work, thinking that the challenge is too great and that nothing can transform the competition over resources among crisis response organisations into co-operation. I believe, however, that we here can make a difference by reorganising our priorities and by formulating well-defined and practical initiatives that can move our agenda forward.

To that end we have invited you all here, this group of highly distinguished experts from the crisis management community – from humanitarian agencies, peace support operations and national emergency responders - as well as experts in utilising information and communication technology in these different and complex crisis situations. I ask that you lend us your intellectual capacity and experience for these three days and help us to move forward.

I am going to be very short. I want to make four points that I see as guiding principles for the work of this conference.

First, we need a political agenda for multiorganisational crisis management. Improving information communications systems in the field is not an aim itself but a means to support the achievement of the political objectives, to rebuild institutions and infrastructure within a country to create conditions conducive to peace and

development. Organisations compete for the same funds, for the same donors and the same media attention. Too many overlapping mandates and too many conflicting interests do not allow rational decision-taking – irrespective of the availability of a common information system.

Operations in the past as well as those ongoing have taught us that a central challenge in any engagement of the international community will be the advancement of a common understanding among the international players. Success and effectiveness on the ground demand that the international community pursue a coherent strategy, one that aims at empowering the local authorities. Many of the difficulties in international interventions can be attributed to a lack of realism, the failings of short-term approaches aimed at dealing with the crisis of the moment and a lack of unified vision by the international community. We must be better, faster and conceptually clearer when we respond to crises, whether international or national, in order to bring tangible results for the local population.

Proper management of information and the resulting analysis of crisis situations are crucial for informed decision-making and the effective use of resources. In October 2000, the Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of the report of the Panel on United Nations peace operations – better known as the Brahimi Report – identified information technology and knowledge management as key to the success of future operations. In the end, it is in the self-interest of organisations to share information and to create systems that facilitate that sharing – for instance, for governments to ensure that their systems are in step with those of their regional neighbours and international partners.

As part of the preparation for this conference I met with the Secretary Generals of the UN, NATO and the OSCE and the Chairman of the EU Military Committee and a high-level civilian official from the EU. They all pledged their firm support for this initiative striving towards increased information sharing and ICT interoperability in humanitarian assistance and crisis management. I see this commitment at the highest political leadership of the agencies as an indispensable factor for achieving interoperability within organisations and among responders in the field.

Second, we need a new management model for international organizations. Efforts of the organizations should be directed to define their objectives better, to set up their operations faster, and to manage their activities more efficiently. The cost of developing their own ICT systems is enormous and this forces organisations to look very hard at what is commercially available right from the start. I have always had the opinion that there is rarely any point in doing things that somebody else can do better. In ICT, the private sector has a lot to offer to governments, international organisations and NGOs, and one key aspect of introducing ICT to crisis management is building relations with the private sector. In addition, within the crisis management community, we have a lot to learn from each other, from our successes and failures, sharing our experiences to build a clearer picture of where we must direct our efforts in future.

Third, we need to implement the commitments made earlier. We have to implement the recommendations of Brahimi report, governments have to ratify the Tampere convention and so on. Some of you were here in Helsinki last year when we organized the first seminar together with the Object Management Group and created this forum for a dialogue between humanitarian and crisis response organisations and the ICT business companies. This initiative is not meant to create something totally new. It aims to enhance the work that is ongoing in other fora and insert new dynamism through new partnerships. However, from last year's experience I remember that it was not easy at first to find a common language and to establish a dialogue between the participants coming from very different backgrounds. We have to overcome the same challenge this year as well.

Fourth, we need a working agenda, an action plan through which we will operationalise the political commitments. This is going to be a working conference. We want practical results - an agenda to guide all of our work during the next year, a common platform to advocate for the necessary changes in the system, and a list of realistic recommendations to each of the relevant communities: governments, international organisations, NGOs and private sector.

When thinking about prerequisites for success in the implementation of these recommendations, we should note that an operation could fail before it has even been deployed if there are not adequate resources and preparedness. During crises there

plenty of resources but little time to devote to these types of development; between crises there is plenty of time but few resources to invest in such preparation. This conference offers the space to discuss and develop such partnerships, to identify and address the underlying causes of this lack of coherence and co-operation, and move towards concrete recommendations that will address these problems in the key sector of ICT.

In order to conclude with a coherent plan that goes beyond the next few days, the conference schedule you have in your packs invites you to develop practical recommendations for implementation in the coming year. The most important parts of the conference will be the workshops, where you have an opportunity to address major issues and move forward, and the final session on Sunday morning, when Mr Paul Currion will report on the highlights of the conference and the results of your workshop discussions.

I would like to conclude by thanking you all for your participation, and wishing you the best of luck in the next few days. I hope that you will see our work here as I do, contributing to an ongoing, wider process of improving our work for the benefit of those that we work for.