

INFORMATION CAN HELP SAVE LIVES

Words of welcome by Mr. Erkki Tuomioja, Minister for Foreign Affairs

Conference on Crisis Management and Information Technology

“Towards Interoperability in Crisis Management”

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- Let me begin by welcoming you to Helsinki and to this important conference. I am happy to see such interest in a theme of topical importance to a broad spectrum of constituencies in the field of crisis management. The fact that this conference coincides with the Nordic Peace exercise and NATO’s Partnership for Peace exercise “Cooperative Knowledge” only serves to demonstrate the dimensions of the problem.
- The post-Cold War period has witnessed both great optimism and utter frustration in the quest for a more stable and peaceful world order. Democracy and respect for human rights have made great strides but also suffered serious setbacks. Far from having seen an end to history, we have come to understand the complexity of human development, often in tragic terms.
- Human suffering can happen and be brought about in myriads of ways. Each crisis has its own genealogy. Most of us, I believe, have come to endorse the idea of the so-called democratic peace: that an open, democratic society enhances stability and thus makes violence less likely to occur within and between countries and nations. But how frustratingly commonplace it is that the mere possibility of change of any kind is enough to trigger oppression and mistreatment of people, with ensuing violence.
- I am convinced that democracy is a precondition for sustained stability and development. But I am equally convinced that in the short term, elections are not synonymous to democracy, nor are they alone enough to put a nation on a sustained path of stability and good governance. What is crucial is to give people a real chance to influence their lives. To become full citizens of their countries and the world, people must gradually learn to respect each other, understand the precarious balance between freedom and the responsibility it inherently carries.
- Two years ago today, we witnessed events that shocked the world. Since the terrorist attacks against the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, the world is not the same. The tragic day two years ago made us understand the new dimensions of terrorism and the changed context in which it is resorted to. In his recent article, the former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Chester Crocker pertinently notes that terrorism is a tool, not an actor. It is a phenomenon to be opposed and eradicated to the extent possible, but it is not an enemy. We should look at its root causes.
- There is no need to oversimplify the issue at stake, but terrorism breeds in situations prone to conflicts and crises. Certainly poverty and deprivation seem to engender conditions for extremist networks to recruit young people prepared to die for a cause. Open conflicts and violence close this vicious circle. Particularly serious situations arise when ethnic, religious or other minority groups become targets for systematic

oppression and violence, be it ethnic cleansing or anything of the kind. When the world community fails in its responsibility to protect the vulnerable, risks proliferate.

- This only serves to underline the scale of the task. We must relentlessly pursue ways and means to prevent conflicts from happening and manage crises to minimise human suffering. It is in this context that the topic of your conference assumes such particular urgency. Information alone, let alone information technology, is not enough to make things happen in the field. They are, nevertheless, crucial parts of the toolbox needed in successful crisis management operations. That is why I would like to challenge you to look at the tasks ahead in the strategic perspective: For what purpose are we trying to develop methodologies for the use of ICT in crisis management? Who are the beneficiaries?
- This implies a broad agenda. We are well aware of the difficult conditions various organisations have to work in while trying to prevent crises and contain their effects. In trying to grapple with their unthankful tasks, organisations of all kinds have to resort to incomplete and missing – if not deliberately false and misleading – information. Different organisations base their actions on different sets of information and different assumptions. They fail to communicate with each other. Messy situations tend to lead to messy solutions.
- The most demanding operations consist of components which are not used to working with each other. There is a military component to maintain or bring about formal peace. There are people sent by governments and international organisations working to set up a local structure to support and take over the operation. Many parts of an operation may be working to provide elementary public utilities and services. And there is an amalgam of non-governmental organisations working on humanitarian relief, medical and health, educational and other aspects of a crisis. The task of putting all of them to work towards the same ends is daunting. The minimum expectation should be to ensure that the components of an operation do not counteract each other for lack of correct, reliable and timely information.
- Critical mistakes happen in difficult circumstances. These circumstances are often directly related to deficiencies in the basic infrastructure. Quite often, this infrastructure never existed in a developing country. Even in places where basic networks may have been in place, they may have been deliberately or mistakenly destroyed, and they may be technically too primitive to provide for reliable links between various actors. Furthermore, it goes without saying, military organisations always have a particular need to secure the integrity of their communication links.
- A true challenge lies in how an international operation manages to make a lasting difference for the better. The crucial element here is how an operation and its needs for a functioning infrastructure can be translated into sustainable structures in the society or community the operation is trying to steer through a crisis. I understand this may be too much to expect for many of you. Crisis management professionals may be justifiably impatient to make the operation run smoothly and successfully, and then leave.
- But many softer, civilian components of an operation will stay behind. They are left with the tasks of reconstruction. The post-operation stage will get a head start if it is

supported with communications infrastructure embracing the local society. In addition, and very importantly, looking beyond the operation itself has much to do with funding the use of ICT in crisis management operations proper.

- The critical element in using information technology in crisis management, as I see it, is saving human lives. This is obvious for all of the various components of the operation itself, be they part of an integrated command-cum-management structure or not. Responsible governments, international organisations and NGOs do not want to put their people in harms way. They want to do their utmost to ensure that military and civilian personnel is not exposed to undue risk.
- If we manage to develop technical solutions which provide for reliable and timely information to be available for the various actors present, we will have taken crucial first steps. To make a significant change for the better, however, the components of an operation must be able to communicate with each other. The more difficult the operation, the more crucial the communication needs.
- The need to save human lives is not limited to international staff. The purpose of any operation, of course, is to prevent a crisis from becoming an open conflict threatening human lives. In difficult situations weak, early signals may be crucial for effective intervention. Collecting, analysing and distributing information from the field are all critical parts of an integrated approach to early warning and prevention.
- This challenge goes well beyond the technical solution. The technical means to ensure communication links and interoperability in difficult conditions are the necessary but not sufficient condition for better and more successful operations in the future.
- I hope your deliberations will be interesting and innovative. I wish all success to your conference and your further work to develop crisis management to save human lives.
- Thank you.