

Martti Ahtisaari: Advocate of imperialist intervention awarded Nobel Peace Prize

Paul Mitchell
27 October 2008

Earlier this month, the Norwegian Nobel Committee awarded its Peace Prize to former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari for his “important efforts, on several continents and over more than three decades, to resolve international conflicts”.

The committee said that “through his untiring efforts and good results, he has shown what role mediation of various kinds can play in the resolution of international conflicts,” referring to his efforts in Namibia, Iraq, Bosnia, Kosovo, Northern Ireland and Aceh (Indonesia).

Ahtisaari, one of 197 nominees, said that he was “very pleased and grateful” at receiving the \$1.4 million prize, which is to be awarded in a ceremony in Oslo on December 10.

World leaders queued up to congratulate Ahtisaari. The US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack declared he had “dedicated his life to promoting peace throughout the world” and former Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright said that she could not “think of a prize that is more richly deserved.”

However, closer to home, the Norwegian peace and conflict studies expert Johan Galtung criticized Ahtisaari saying that he “does not solve conflicts but drives through short-term solutions that please western countries.” The Swedish Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research labelled as “scandalous” the decision to honour a man whose solutions involved militarism and violations of international law.

Ahtisaari’s name became synonymous with the development of United Nations “plans for independence” that became an important cover for imperialist intervention. It is true his solutions involved military intervention and the overturning of international law, but equally important was his ability to exploit the bankrupt perspective of bourgeois nationalism. He eased the way for liberation movement leaders to lay down their arms and make their peace with imperialism in return for a seat in the corridors of power and the promise of personal enrichment.

Not one of the state structures that Ahtisaari helped create can be called truly independent. They are all dominated by Western financial institutions and plagued by corruption, ethnic divisions and social inequality. Most teeter on the brink of further conflict.

Ahtisaari’s appearance on the diplomatic scene coincided with the biggest offensive by the international working class since the end of the Second World War. This offensive, lasting seven years from 1968 to 1975, assumed revolutionary forms, forced the resignation of governments, brought down dictatorships and rocked the system of bourgeois rule to its foundations.

In Finland the beneficiary of this movement was the Social Democratic Party, which had formed its first majority government in 1966. At the same time, as one of Ahtisaari’s diplomatic colleagues, Kimmo Pulkkinen, has explained, “the government and Foreign Ministry saw the United Nations as a vehicle, as an instrument through which and by which Finland could materialise her policy and deliver political statements.”

Ahtisaari was in the right place at the right time. He had joined the Foreign Ministry in 1965 and by 1972 had risen to become Deputy

Director in the Department for International Development Co-operation.

The following year he was appointed Finnish Ambassador to the United Republic of Tanzania, where he developed close relations with the leadership of the exiled Namibian liberation movement, the South-West African Peoples Organisation (SWAPO).

After World War II the League of Nations had given South Africa a mandate to administer the former German colony of South-West Africa. Although the United Nations later revoked the mandate, the South African government refused to relinquish its apartheid-based rule.

The five Western members of the UN Security Council--the US, Britain, Canada, West Germany and France--were determined to protect their economic interests in the region, limit the influence of the Soviet Union and prevent the development of a revolutionary movement amongst the oppressed masses.

Ahtisaari and Namibia

The UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim appointed Ahtisaari as UN Commissioner for Namibia in 1977, where he proceeded to draw up a plan for independence to be enforced by a Special Representative in charge of a UN Transitional Assistance Group (UNTAG) of 4,650 soldiers and about 1,500 police and administrators. This was a major development, which went well beyond the limited peacekeeping tasks that the UN had hitherto been involved in.

However, the process ground to a halt in 1980, when the newly elected US President, Ronald Reagan, demanded the removal of all Cuban soldiers from Angola, Namibia’s neighbour to the north, as a condition of Namibian independence.

It was almost a decade before the US, Soviet Union, Cuba, Angola and South Africa agreed to Namibia’s independence and Ahtisaari returned as Special Representative of the UN Secretary General to oversee its implementation.

According to *The Transition to Independence in Namibia*, SWAPO soldiers began to return to Namibia in the days leading up to independence on April 1, 1989. According to independent monitors, they had been told to cross the border with their arms and surrender to UNTAG, but the South African government claimed the incursion was an act of aggression. Ahtisaari, after consulting South African Foreign Minister Pik Botha and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, agreed to a South African Defence Force “hunt and destroy” mission, which led to the deaths of some 300 SWAPO fighters.

SWAPO leader Sam Nujoma condemned the massacre saying, “At this crucial and critical hour for Namibia’s freedom, [Ahtisaari’s] action betrayed our cause and resulted in the deaths of many civilians.” Despite calling Ahtisaari “very much a collaborator with the US and pro-British

[and] more concerned with his career at the United Nations than with his responsibilities to the oppressed people of Namibia” one of Nujoma’s first actions as the newly installed president of Namibia was to make the Finnish diplomat an honorary citizen.

Chester Crocker the former US Assistant Secretary State for African Affairs, who summed up the Namibian peace process as “another American exercise”, praised Ahtisaari’s role and the way he exhibited “extreme skills” as “an international civil servant.” Ahtisaari still sees his role in Namibia as his greatest achievement. The idea of a UN Special Representative backed up by foreign troops became a blueprint for future imperialist interventions.

Since taking power the SWAPO leadership has abandoned all traces of its former socialist rhetoric and become part of a bureaucratic and corrupt elite that has plundered public resources. Despite Namibia having substantial earnings from diamonds, uranium and other minerals, it remains one of the most unequal countries in the world. The richest 10 percent receive 65 percent of income whilst some 56 percent of the population live on less than \$2 a day. Unemployment has risen from 19 percent in 1992 to nearly 40 percent today (it is a staggering 60 percent amongst young people) and life expectancy is a terrible 46 years, made worse by a rate of HIV/Aids infection amongst the worst in Africa.

Good quality agricultural land remains concentrated in the 4,000 large commercial mainly white-owned farms and only 35,000 black farmers have been resettled since independence. The country remains tied to the South African currency and over half of the capital generated is exported there.

In 1999, civil war erupted as guerrillas from the Caprivi Liberation Army led by former SWAPO vice-president and a leader of the opposition Democratic Turnhalle Alliance, Mishake Muyongo, took up arms calling for an independent Barotseland.

Despite the catastrophe facing the Namibian people the International Monetary Fund is demanding further attacks on the already rock-bottom living standards--greater labour flexibility and lower labour costs. Its latest report complains that \$300 a month for production workers is too high compared to the \$100-150 they receive in many neighbouring countries, criticises the new Labour Act which increases annual leave from 18 to 24 days a year and calls for more temporary, part-time employment.

Ahtisaari and Yugoslavia

Ahtisaari’s experience in Namibia meant he became a sought after commodity when other conflicts needed resolution in the interests of imperialism, most notably during the break-up of the former Yugoslavia.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Balkans assumed exceptional strategic importance as a staging post for the projection of imperialist power towards the vital energy reserves of the Caspian Sea and Central Asia. The US was determined to encircle Russia by penetrating the former spheres of influence of the Soviet Union and so reinforce its influence in Europe. The European powers, above all Germany, also regarded their intervention in the Balkans as crucial for enhancing their weight in Europe. (The fact that the US was able to play such a leading role in Europe’s “back yard” was to be regarded as painful proof of the bloc’s impotence.)

The US and its Western allies set about dismantling the unitary Yugoslav Federation in 1991 by officially recognising its various republics--beginning with Slovenia, Croatia, and then Bosnia--as independent sovereign states. They formed alliances with some of the region’s rival bourgeois and petty-bourgeois semi-criminal cliques that

were seeking to consolidate themselves as a comprador ruling elite with Western support, against Serbia, which was the strongest of the regional nascent capitalist powers and had the most interest therefore in maintaining some unitary federal structure.

The result was the 1992-1995 Bosnian war, involving a struggle between Serbia and Croatia that cost tens of thousands of lives and ended with the first imperialist military intervention in the Balkans since the Second World War. Ahtisaari was appointed chairman of the Bosnia-Herzegovina Working Group of the International Conference on the Former Yugoslavia. In this role he enshrined the concept of ethnically-based states--a continuing recipe for division, discrimination, ethnic cleansing and war--producing the map partitioning the province into the ten ethnic cantons under the ill-fated Vance-Owen plan.

The drive for Kosovan independence pursued by the KLA, with US backing, culminated in the war in 1999 that saw the massive and sustained NATO bombardment of Serbia, and its defeat. In November 2005, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan appointed Ahtisaari as Special Envoy for the resolution of the status of Kosovo. The US and the major European powers aggressively pursued the independence plan authored by Ahtisaari, which led to Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence in February 2008.

The International Crisis Group, of which Ahtisaari was chairman from 2000-2004 warned this month that Kosovo’s “calm surface is deceptive”. It protests that Ahtisaari’s plan has been undermined by the international organisations meant to help implement it. The EU’s biggest-ever European security and defence policy (ESDP) mission is delayed and the International Civilian Office, projected to supervise independence, is a “shell”. Divisions between Albanian and Serb areas have widened, and prospects for a unitary state are “evaporating”, which could lead to yet another redrawing of borders along ethnic lines. Kosovo courts, border and customs posts do not operate in the northern part of the country, and Kosovo Serbs refuse to cooperate with Kosovo institutions or the EU. In May, Serbia held municipal elections in Kosovo against the explicit instructions of the UN Special Representative.

Growing tensions have erupted between the Western powers and Russia, which used Kosovo as a pretext for its military intervention in Georgia in August and subsequent unilateral recognition of the breakaway region of South Ossetia.

To make matters worse, Kosovo’s independence has only been recognised by 50 states. About 140 UN members continue to refuse to recognize the new country, including five EU countries. Spain actively campaigned in Latin America against Kosovo’s recognition. It is a bitter blow to Europe’s bourgeoisie, which had hoped to use its first foreign policy outing to raise its prestige on the world arena.

The EU suffered a serious defeat on October 8 when the UN voted overwhelmingly in support of Serbia’s appeal to the International Court of Justice to rule on the legality of Kosovo’s declaration of independence. Nearly all EU members abstained from the vote. Fearing that Kosovo’s recognition might spur separatist movements in their own countries, Spain, Slovakia, Romania, Greece and Cyprus voted *with* Serbia.

The Balkan people face a catastrophe. Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Republic of Kosovo are neither economically nor politically viable, and nothing more than protectorates set up by the great powers. The region has become a byword for ethnic division, corruption and crime. In Bosnia nearly 20 percent of the population are poor existing on an income of less than \$1,200 a year and a further 30 percent are vulnerable to poverty. Unemployment stands at 32 percent and amongst young people it is 65 percent. In Kosovo more than 47 percent of the population are in poverty, living on less than \$2 a day. According to World Vision, “Thirteen percent of the people live in extreme poverty, surviving on less than 2,100 calories a day per adult, lacking access to safe water and health services and living with the prospect of not seeing their 40th birthday. Six out of

10 people don't have a job--63% of 15 to 24 year olds are unemployed."



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact