

International Association for Human Values  
**Conference on Peace and Reconciliation in South Asia**  
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### **Norway's Commitment for Peace and Reconciliation in Asia**

Address by Ambassador Jon Hanssen-Bauer  
Special Representative

Excellencies and friends,

I would first of all like to thank the International Association for Human Values for inviting me to address this conference. I would like to commend the organization, and in particular His Holiness Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, for this initiative to gather experts and professionals to discuss the challenging task of promoting peace in Asia.

Norway has a long history of engaging with countries in Asia with an aim of supporting peace initiatives, negotiation processes, and peace building. This engagement ranges from quiet and low key support to processes like the ones in Nepal, Aceh, and East-Timor, to more profiled work as the facilitator of negotiations as we have been invited to in Sri Lanka and the Philippines. In Afghanistan, Norway contributes to the Nato-led stabilization forces under UN mandate, and it contributes, dollar for dollar, the same amount of financial support to civil peace building efforts as to the military component.

The objective of my address is not, however, to make a list of Norwegian engagements. I would rather focus on a few principles guiding our work and the roles that we engage in – in this particular area of the world. If I should sum up our approach in two sentences, I would say that Norway believes in the strength of a soft-powered, or weak if you prefer, facilitator. Also, Norway believes more in building coalitions of complementary good offices that can together nurture and facilitate a process of building peace, than to engage on the basis of one single, all-purpose, mediator. A mediator, in our terminology, will often relate to the conflict on the basis of an mandate external to the parties to help forge an

agreement between them. A facilitator can be more effective if they are unbiased, impartial, and have no preferences of their own as to how the disputed issue should be solved.

Over seven years now, Norway has organized retreats for mediators together with the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in Geneva. The purpose is to discuss lessons learned between active mediators with a view to professionalize the business of peace making. This year, just four weeks ago in Beijing, China hosted one of our retreats for mediators who are active Asia. Here, the participants representing governments in the region told the participants that prospective mediators must understand the regional context.

Most conflicts in Asia are intrastate or internal conflicts. They are between governments on the one hand, and armed insurgencies on the other. And, as it was formulated in the Beijing retreat, there is in Asia “a regional aversion against getting involved in somebody else’s internal affairs” based on a sense of national pride and on historical experience. It was quite useful for me, as a Norwegian, to be reminded of the fact that the western countries tend to forget the history of foreign interference in the region – a pattern that nobody wants to see repeated.

A second advice, was to be fully recognizant of the regional diversities. Of course there is truth in the saying that no conflict is equal. It is useful to repeat it here that direct transfer of experience from one place to the other, even within Asia, is not a recipe for success. Each single conflict can only be addressed on its own premises. We, being facilitators or mediators, and regardless of whether we represent governments, the UN or private NGO’s, must never forget that even with the best preparations, and even acquiring the best knowledge of the country we work with, we will never understand the history of the conflict, the political culture or the local culture writ large sufficiently to act as anything else than a foreigner.

Norway agrees fundamentally to these pieces of advice from an experienced audience in Beijing. We think that our forms of engagement must be tailored to suit the regional sensitivities and the fact that we will always act on a basis of imperfect knowledge or understanding of the local situation. Therefore, one should not be tempted to try impose an externally design solution to conflicts, but assist the parties in defining a domestic one. Anyhow, Norway as a small power, with limited leverage to impose our views in conflicts, is less tempted than maybe others.

Norwegian peace diplomacy is **first of all** anchored in the United Nations. The UN is the only universally accepted institution to address threats to international peace and stability. The UN should be equipped with all the necessary instruments to deal with all types and phases of conflict prevention, conflict solution and peace building. In addition, we see that regional organizations like the ASEAN may supplement the work of the UN in a very good way.

The **second principle** of Norwegian peace diplomacy is that we only engage in facilitating negotiations or peace processes when the parties to a given conflict invite us to do so. By working on invitation only, we feel that we respect the sovereignty of the states, and we respect the sensitivities of the rebel groups. The implication of this fact, is also that we remain impartial.

In Sri Lanka, Norway was invited by the parties to facilitate talks between the Government and the Tamil Tigers. On behalf of the Government, President Kumaratunga extended this invitation to us in the year 2000, and behalf of the LTTE, its leader Prabhakaran did the same. Norway is still committed to the task that we at that time accepted to do. We accepted, because Norway has enjoyed a very long history of presence in and solidarity with Sri Lanka. The history of development cooperation between our two countries goes back to the 1960s and is of substantial size for Norway.

The **third principle**, is that the ownership of processes must remain with the principals and the parties to the conflicts. This is the reason why we call ourselves facilitators. We are not advocating any particular solution or imposing anything. In our view, mediation works best when the mediators opt for a low profile and avoid visibility on their own behalf. They should aim for a limited and modest role, be more obsessed with process than results, and stay involved through the complex ups and downs of a typical peace process. Being a partner with limited leverage on its own can have advantages, as there is less interest in making us pawns to the conflict.

To use Sri Lanka as an example again, we respect the fact that the parties must define when and how to talk. During 2006, when the parties invited Norway to resume talks, Norway spared no efforts to make them happen even within a context of increasing violence. In December the same year, when there had already been several military confrontations, it became evident that Norway could do very little. We conveyed this to the Government and to

the LTTE, and told that we would take no further initiative before they conveyed to us that they wanted our services. Meanwhile, our main task is to preserve the logistics and infrastructure for talks, to provide an open and discrete channel of communication, and be ready when the timing is correct.

Nepal may give another example of a much more indirect and even more invisible role played by Norway. We were not invited by the parties to take a role as a facilitator, but we offered our premises as a venue for informal discussions and meetings. We also hosted seminars on experiences from other peace processes on topics of relevance for all, they being Government, Maoists or the seven party alliance. We have tried to be of help when called upon, and nudged all players in the same direction whenever nudging seemed necessary. The ownership of the process remained all the time with the parties, never with us.

The **fourth principle**, is that while being impartial, Norway is not neutral in the sense of not defending values. Conflict solution must be based on fundamental and internationally shared values. Norway is consistent in promoting respect for human rights. We uphold and defend the primacy of international humanitarian law. We engage on the basis of solidarity with the people, respect for sovereignty, and in the belief in the rights of people to democratically define their own future. Our work is firmly based on the principles and resolutions vested in the UN.

We are often asked whether we are completely uninterested in the negotiated outcomes. No, we are an interested partner. For example, I can imagine conflicts where it may be difficult for Norway to take a role. On the other hand, we are often invited because we have the reputation of not imposing our views and, probably because we were not part of the colonialism in the region, we are perceived as not to engage out of self-interest. In Sri Lanka, there are speculations from time to time whether we are there to search for oil or for harbours or other things. The answer is that we are not motivated by such interests. Of course, we welcome business cooperation and matchmaking between Sri Lankan and Norwegian companies. Such exploration of mutual commercial interest is wonderful, but does not motivate our engagement for peace.

We also feel that it is favourable when we can agree on what the broad parameters for talks are. To use Sri Lanka as an example again, the common understanding with the government and with the LTTE has been that talks are aimed at finding a political solution

that are acceptable to all communities in Sri Lanka. For Norway, any solution endorsed by the Sri Lankan people as stated above, is of course acceptable to us.

The **fifth principle** is to take a stakeholder approach to conflicts. Norway understands the need to break cycles of violence and to engage in negotiations for ceasing the hostilities and agree on peace between warring parties. However, we try to keep a long-term, peace building perspective, and not focus only on achieving an agreement. We know that for peace to be sustainable, all stakeholders to the solution must be brought into a broader process. This may be done in many ways, and in the ultimate end, there must be a sanction to solutions by the people through democratic means.

What then, do a partner like Norway bring to help solve a conflict? The shortest and maybe the best answer, is that it will depend on the needs of the parties. Norway is ready offer resources that governments with active participation in the international community can do. It ranges from places to meet secluded from the public eye, confidentiality, expertise, financing events, bringing trustful and honest messages, providing access to external expertise, and to mobilising the international community to make efforts to support peace building processes. Norway places particular attention to regional aspects and linkages of conflicts, and may be of help in keeping elder brethren and interested powers adequately briefed, for them to engage in a constructive way.

This constitutes my **last and sixth principle**, that solving protracted conflicts most often need much more varied and extensive support than one single mediator can bring. Therefore, we see more and more that peace making and peace building become internationalized. The international community builds coalitions around specific peace processes in order to bring the requested resources and power to sustain a process over long time – the time it eventually takes for the parties to transform conflict societies into peaceful ones.

What are our overall experiences of engaging in peace processes? I can conclude by briefly pointing at three qualities that are required: To be facilitator you need a thick skin, limitless patience, and a long perspective. In addition, if you are not honest and try to play power games, you run the risk of becoming a pawn of the conflict.