

Conflict resolution

The discreet charms of the international go-between

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Illustration by Claudio Munoz



A murky world of back-channels, secret meetings and close encounters for a new breed of problem-solver, both secular and (see [article](#)) religious

FOR two months, Kenya, East Africa's most prosperous and supposedly stable country, hovered on the brink of self-immolation as two warring political factions ripped the country apart after a disputed election at the end of 2007. Kofi Annan, the former secretary-general of the United Nations, was brought in to try to resolve the conflict between the ruling party, which was accused of rigging its presidential victory, and the opposition Orange Democratic Movement (ODM). As ethnic violence raged nearby, negotiators from the two sides would sometimes almost come to blows themselves as Mr Annan tried to find common ground between them.

But when deadlock loomed, both sides' negotiating teams were smuggled off to a secret location in a game park for two days, with just Mr Annan and his secretariat, including a team from a little-known group called the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (CHD). There, with no distractions from the media and far from the political circus in the capital, Nairobi, came the vital breakthrough. The main outlines of a deal between the two sides were talked through in an atmosphere of relative calm; a new national unity government, comprising both the ruling party and the ODM, was inaugurated a few weeks later.

Originally, Mr Annan had flown into Nairobi with just two people from the CHD, a Swiss-based organisation of mediators. During his six weeks or so of mediating he

drew on the considerable resources of the UN, but he also made constant use of his CHD backup.

They provided him with tactical advice on the mediation process, such as when to take the negotiators on "retreat" and how to involve the media. And they also drafted agreements as the two sides spoke during the negotiations, so that at the end of a day an agreed statement could be issued immediately to the press. This gave the mediation the vital momentum that Mr Annan wanted.

The Kenyan talks provide a good example of the sort of skills that a new kind of international mediator can bring to the age-old work of conflict resolution. For as the nature of the world's conflicts has changed in the past decade or so, so the demand for a new type of mediator has grown too.

The CHD, for instance, founded by just four people only nine years ago, now has a staff of over 70. The UN has traditionally provided a forum for the discussion and resolution of international disputes. However as Kreddha, a Dutch-based mediation group, argues: "There are no equivalent mechanisms for intrastate dispute resolution...despite the fact that most violent conflicts today are not international but intrastate in character." The new mediators provide the new mechanisms.

Many of these contemporary conflicts involve insurgents, secessionists or even "resource-warriors", like those in the oil-rich Niger Delta of Nigeria, who clash with governments. Rival politicians can be brought into open conflict by elections, such as in Kenya, or now Zimbabwe.

The new kinds of disputes involve non-traditional parties such as international mining or oil companies pitched against indigenous people, as well as national governments tackling more established terrorist groups. One study has shown that over the past 15 years military victories have resolved only 7.5% of conflicts, while negotiations have prevailed in 92% of cases; "the challenge is thus not being a skilful warrior but a skilful negotiator."

The UN might, at best, offer some bureaucratic and political clout, but it is also big, cumbersome and leaky. In its place, the new mediators operate on a much smaller scale and offer discretion, secrecy and flexibility. Mr Annan used the CHD in Kenya because it has no political agenda, so could be relied upon not to leak material in order to influence the talks one way or another. These mediators are ideal for getting involved in highly charged disputes between governments, for instance, and indigenous "terrorist" groups; they can set up back-channels, of the sort that proved vital in bringing about the eventual peace deal between the British government and the Irish Republican Army.

Thus the CHD provided a first conduit between the rebel Free Aceh Movement and the Indonesian government, as the Indonesians refused to use the UN because of anger over its role in East Timor. In Nepal, the CHD established the first links between the government and the Maoist insurgents in 2000. Here a key factor was "plausible deniability", as was trust. Andrew Marshall, who sought out the first Maoist interlocutors, says that "neither side wanted their own people and cadres to know they were talking to the other side", so the leaders of both the government and the rebels invested their trust in the third party, CHD, to keep the talks secret.

Eventually, several countries got involved and this year the Maoists prevailed in elections.

The CHD also acted as a back-channel between the Spanish government and the Basque separatist movement ETA leading up to a ceasefire in 2006; it is currently trying to bring together the Darfur rebel groups in Sudan as one negotiating body. Kreddha has been involved in mediation work in the Niger Delta, and in New Caledonia between a mining corporation, Goro Nickel, and an indigenous environmental organisation called Rheebeu Nuu. Such disputes are often called "resource conflicts", and require specialist mediators with a knowledge of international law. Another new organisation called Conflicts Forum, founded by a former British intelligence officer, Alastair Crooke, attempts to serve as an interlocutor between militant Islamist groups, such as Hamas and Hizbullah, and the West.

Some mediation work can be instantly glamorous and hugely fulfilling, as in Kenya, but most of it is attritional; often it is pretty boring. Negotiations can drag on for years, but here again the small mediators can add a lot of value. Foreign politicians from America and Britain, for example, may bring a lot of pressure to bear on a dispute for a short amount of time, but inevitably they come and go according to the whims and demands of domestic politics. Professional mediators can stick with a conflict for years, thus building up a level of trust and knowledge that cannot easily be replicated. Much of a mediator's work lies in getting the logistics right; trusted third-party interlocutors are needed simply to arrange meetings and book hotel rooms which will not be bugged by the other side.

In the case of CHD, it can also get visas and facilitate travel for "terrorists" taking part in talks in neutral venues like Switzerland or Norway. Both are strong financial backers of the centre, and neither is a member of the EU; they are thus outside the conventions restricting travel for those on some terrorist watch lists. Small countries backing small mediators can make a big difference; the betting now is on Mr Annan and his team trying to repeat their Kenya trick in beleaguered Zimbabwe.