

15 March 2001

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,  
President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly,  
at the Seminar on the Åland Islands as an Example for Peaceful  
Governance – “Autonomy - An Alternative to Secession?”**

It is a great personal honour to me to have this opportunity to give the closing remarks of this seminar.

During this afternoon we have had the opportunity to go back in history and follow the development of the autonomy of the Åland Islands, providing a unique and concrete example of peaceful governance from the point of view of international law. We started with the demilitarisation of the islands after the Crimean War, and continued with the development of their legal status from the resolution of the dispute by the League of Nations to the present-day autonomy and neutrality. As regards the present, we have given thought to the more general significance of autonomy as an alternative to sovereignty, as well as to the possibility of applying the example of Åland to the present-day regional and ethnic conflicts, such as the Balkan conflict.

It is important for us to be able to share the lessons learned and experience gained with the international community, including both governmental and non-governmental actors. I strongly believe that the sharing of experiences like this is fruitful and will, on its part, provide a source of inspiration for those aiming at a peaceful settlement of conflicts.

In this connection it is important to remember, however, that the Åland model has been designed for the particular needs of the Åland Islands. I very much agree with what Professor Franck said about this issue. It would not be feasible to suggest that the model could be adopted and applied into a conflict situation with a view to achieving peaceful governance and a solution satisfying all the parties to the conflict. In my mind the case of Åland is more a way of thinking than a model. As we have learnt today, even in the case of Åland the achievement of a satisfactory and balanced situation took years after the League of Nations had settled the dispute. The autonomy of Åland did not find its present form until all the necessary practical arrangements had been established.

As President Ahtisaari observed in his address, the Åland example has two aspects - both the wide regional autonomy and the neutrality and demilitarisation of the islands. This was also touched upon by Madam Naucclér. The questions of neutrality and demilitarisation have often been given too little attention in conflict resolution. They both could offer useful solutions for present-day conflicts, also on a more permanent basis.

From June 1996 until Friday 10 April 1998, that was the Good Friday of that year, I had the honour to co-chair certain parts of the negotiations on Northern Ireland together with Senator George Mitchell of USA and General John de Chastelain of Canada. During these talks, the

Autonomy and international status of the Åland Islands was often on my mind. Not that I would have referred to the Åland example at any time in official discussions. That would not have been compatible with the role of the Independent Chair. The Chairmen were not to have any ready-made solution for a settlement. Having the Åland Island on my mind I did not imply an effort from my part officially to sell these concepts to the parties taking part in the talks. But the prolonged negotiations process provided ample opportunities to have informal discussions with the parties involved. Besides listening and discussing I naturally elaborated on our own experiences of conflict resolution in our own part of Europe. The Office of the Independent Chairmen also produced and provided information in writing on the example of the Åland Islands. It has to be said that information also was prepared and distributed on the institutional and practical co-operation between the Nordic Countries as well. I also understood that our information in writing was a real selling article in the corridors of the Stormont Castle Buildings. It is evident that some parts of the Nordic concept can be found in the Belfast Agreement. The Åland Islands for their part might well have influenced the thinking of the negotiators as an example of autonomy in an international and constitutional framework.

While I was the Prime Minister of Finland some ten years ago the proposal on introducing a new Self-Governing legislation for the Åland Islands, also mentioned by Professor Koskenniemi, caused an animated debate in the Finnish Parliament. On more than one occasion the intervention of the Prime Minister was needed to clarify the needs for a reform of the rules governing the autonomy without touching the very core of the constitutional and international status of the Islands. My message in those days to colleagues in the Government and in the Parliament being sceptic to a consolidation of the Autonomy has remained unchanged until today: a society and a nation that claims to be civilised can afford and must have the political capacity to defend and to develop the rights of its minorities. This is something similar to what Professor Woodward mentioned in her contribution just a while ago.

I wish to express my gratitude to the organisers of the seminar, to the Permanent Representation of Finland and especially to the Provincial Government of Åland, for this opportunity to get information on both the Province and its unique autonomy. It has been a pleasure to follow the excellent and thought-raising presentations and the open discussion concerning both the experience gained and the future challenges. I sincerely believe that this seminar has fulfilled its purpose - it has given food for thought with regard to the possibility of resolving regional or ethnic conflicts in the light of the example provided by Åland, taking advantage of the benefits relating to regional autonomy, neutrality and demilitarisation.

Ladies and gentlemen, several regions of the world are still taking the first steps in their efforts towards a lasting peaceful governance. I hope that the thoughts we have raised during this seminar will be forwarded to those regions, in order to contribute to their search for solutions.