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KOSOVO: FINAL STATUS PROCESS STARTS

Summary

1. We need to resolve Kosovo's final status soon. Good that Ahtisaari is appointed and the final status process launched. But 2006 will still bring its share of crises for Kosovo and the final status process. Belgrade may, for example, refuse to engage just as, on occasion, they refused to negotiate at Dayton. We need to hold our nerve and persuade others to do so too.

Above all, we should support Ahtisaari. He will need to:

- Get credible guarantees from the Kosovars for minority groups, including protection for religious and cultural heritage;
- Make progress on decentralisation, so that there can be a degree of self government for Serb and other minority communities, but on the same basis as for Albanians;
- Reach agreement with the international community on the framework to oversee independence from Belgrade and the subsequent transition to full independent statehood. An EU rule of law/police mission, continued NATO presence (including US troops) and IFI (World Bank, IMF, EBRD, EIB) involvement in economic development, all perhaps under some form of High Representative with the necessary powers to make it happen.

2. We will also need to be creative. We have initiated discussion in the Contact Group to look at elements of a package of incentives for Belgrade, including possible economic and visa issues, to encourage them to look forward. The prize – closing one of the final chapters of the Milosevic era - is large. None of this is risk free. If we succeed, we will have transformed Kosovo into an independent state (under continued international community monitoring and supervision) and the region as a whole will be better placed to fulfil its Euro-Atlantic aspirations without the present Belgrade/Pristina sore. That would be good for the Balkans and, by reinforcing stability in the EU's backyard, good for the UK and the rest of Europe.

Detail

3. Martti Ahtisaari, the UN's Status Envoy for Kosovo, was in London earlier this month. He visited Belgrade and Pristina in late November. Contact