



Group Political Directors saw him in Paris last week. Below we set out how we expect Ahtisaari to take forward the process to decide Kosovo's final status and what we know of his intentions.

#### Independence for Kosovo?

4. Although Kosovo's final status process is only in its infancy, Ahtisaari is clear about its ultimate destination— there is no alternative to some form of independence for Kosovo with international and other guarantees to secure minority rights (there's no good shorthand phrase for this. We ourselves have used conditional independence). This has been the working assumption of all members of the Contact Group (UK, US, France, Germany, Italy and Russia) for some time. It is also the view of an increasing number of international and domestic organisations. The report earlier this year into HMG's policy towards the Western Balkans by the previous FAC concluded that Kosovo should be independent. And the International Crisis Group and the International Commission on the Balkans as well as the likes of the Financial Times and the Wall Street Journal have reached the same conclusion.

5. This growing consensus reflects in good part the recognition that doing nothing in Kosovo is not an option. The people of Kosovo have waited far longer than the three years envisaged at the Rambouillet peace talks for a resolution to their undefined status (a process that was widely expected ultimately to end in independence). They are growing increasingly impatient. The March 2004 riots were a stark – and unacceptable – reminder of the risks that further delay would bring.

6. This is not to suggest that independence will solve all of Kosovo's problems. Kosovo's institutions remain weak, the rule of law is limited and relations between its Albanian majority and minority communities strained. To this extent, Kosovo is already a "failing state". But, as Ministers agreed in 2003, some form of independence is the outcome that seems most likely to enable the people of Kosovo to tackle, with ongoing international support, the challenges they face at the same time as reinforcing regional stability and strengthening multi-ethnic and democratic society in Kosovo. Only the real prospect of independence will persuade the Kosovo Albanians to agree to the necessary guarantees to the Serbs and other minority communities that Belgrade and the international community will require and to focus on the administrative reforms and capacity building which are needed to make independence workable. Meanwhile, the expectation of independence is now so strong that not to agree it could be seriously destabilising. It is, after all, the outcome that 90% of the people of Kosovo are expecting.

7. It is difficult to say what precise form Kosovo's independence might take. There is no template. The stasis of the last 6 years has left few options on the table. We cannot keep troop levels high indefinitely with no prospect of a