

## **Baltic balancing act**

U.N. Special Envoy's Experience

**Tommy Koh**

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IN 1992, then United Nations secretary-general Boutros Boutros-Ghali had approved of the manner in which I had chaired the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. He asked me to join his Cabinet and to take charge of all matters relating to the environment and sustainable development.

I declined on the grounds that I saw a conflict of interest in going from chairing the UN Conference on Environment and Development to taking a position on the issues covered by the Conference at the UN Secretariat.

A few months later, Dr Boutros-Ghali asked me to accept appointment as his special envoy to undertake a 'mission impossible'. I told him the chances of success were very slim but would be enhanced if I had the support of the five permanent members of the Security Council. Dr Boutros-Ghali refused to approach the council on the grounds that the UN General Assembly had empowered him to make the appointment. I respected his position but declined the appointment.

In 1993, I received another call from him requesting me to accept appointment as his special envoy to Russia, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. I decided not to rebuff him for the third time but confessed that I had never been to the four countries. He said: 'That's good. You will go with an open mind and carry no baggage from the past.'

Russia had formally recognised the independence of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in September 1991. The Baltic States demanded the withdrawal of Russian troops from their territories. The four governments had held several rounds of talks between 1992 and 1993.

Frustrated by the slow progress, the Baltic states submitted the question to the UN and succeeded in persuading the General Assembly to urge the secretary-general to 'use his good offices'. Thus my appointment.

The role of the special envoy is similar to that of an international mediator. He is not an arbitrator or a judge. He can only make recommendations to the parties to a dispute. It is up to them whether to accept his recommendations.

I enlisted the support of the permanent members of the Security Council, the European Community and countries which were willing to help resolve the problem. I tried to persuade the Russians, Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians to show goodwill and flexibility. I gently reminded the Baltic states that they were destined to live next door to Russia, which was weak then but would be strong again.

## **Lithuania**

I WILL never forget the day I arrived in Vilnius. I was received by the country's chief of protocol at the airport and taken to the square in front of the Parliament, where I found thousands of people celebrating the departure of the last Russian combat troops from Lithuanian territory. From the square, I went to the president's residence where there was another party. When I was introduced to President (Algirdas Mykolas) Brazauskas, I asked him for the story.

He was a big and humorous man, formerly the head of the Lithuanian Communist Party and a good friend of (former Russian president) Boris Yeltsin. He said that, in anticipation of my visit, he had called Yeltsin and persuaded him to agree to withdraw the few remaining Russian troops the next day. I was, of course, overjoyed because the problem had been solved.

## **Latvia**

THE situation in Latvia was more complicated. I made the following recommendations. On the timing for the withdrawal of Russian troops, I appealed to both sides to compromise. To the Russians, I explained that an earlier date was important to the Latvians for political and psychological reasons. To the Latvians, I pleaded for patience in order to give the Russians time to build housing for the 18,000 troops and their families.

On the fate of the 20,000 Russian military pensioners and their families, I found that 87 per cent of them wanted to remain in Latvia. I recommended that those who had settled in Latvia before it had declared its independence should be granted permanent residence. As most of the pensioners were elderly, I also recommended that their housing and medicare should not be withdrawn.

After visiting the Russian naval base in Liepaja, I was not persuaded by Russia's request to retain the base for an additional five to six years. As for the military facilities in Skrunda and Venspils, I recommended that the two sides should negotiate agreements for Russia to lease those facilities

for an agreed period of time, so she could replicate those facilities inside Russian territory.

## **Estonia**

ESTONIA was the most difficult case. This was partly because the Estonians had suffered the most under Stalin and because of the large number of Russian military retirees and their families, totalling 52,000.

The then Estonian president L. Meri explained to me that about a third of the country's population, including his own family, had been deported to Siberia. The recent incident arising from the Estonian government's decision to relocate a statue of a Russian soldier from the centre of the city to a less conspicuous location is a reminder that both communities in Estonia are still haunted by the ghosts of the past.

I was scolded by some Estonian parliamentarians when I urged them to embrace the virtue of forgiveness.

I made the following recommendations. On the date of the troop withdrawal, I suggested a compromise between the Estonians' deadline of end-1993 and the Russians' deadline of end-1994. On the discontinued nuclear submarine training centre at Paldiski, I urged the two sides to solve the problem as a technical, not a political, one. The nuclear reactors had been deactivated but the nuclear fuel rods, the nuclear waste in storage and other nuclear materials had to be taken by rail to St Petersburg. If necessary, I suggested the two parties request the help of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The most contentious issue was the fate of the 52,000 Russian settlers who wished to remain in Estonia because they had no homes in Russia to go back to. I recommended that all those who had retired before Estonia regained its independence should be allowed to remain in Estonia and continue to enjoy their housing and medical benefits.

I told representatives of the Russian Union of Veterans and Pensioners that they could no longer expect to enjoy special rights and privileges but should be treated with fairness and humanity. I also said that those Russians who wanted to become Estonian citizens must be loyal to Estonia, learn its language and respect its culture.

My peace mission to Russia and the Baltics was successful because I was lucky with the timing and because my efforts complemented those of several other organisations, countries and individuals. In 1993, Russia was weak and in serious economic difficulties. Yeltsin needed the help of the West and was willing to be cooperative in the Baltics.

I am glad that I was able to make a small contribution to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and their relations with Russia. Since 1993, the three Baltic countries have made impressive economic progress. They now feel more secure as members of the European Union and Nato.

*The writer is Singapore's Ambassador-at-Large. The above is an excerpt of an essay that appeared in the Asian Journal on Mediation, a publication of the Singapore Mediation Centre.*