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Switzerland is an important and much sought-after mediator

Switzerland's good deeds remain much in demand throughout the world. Swiss mediators can take particular pride in the peace accord between Maoist rebels and the royal house of Nepal.

By Heinz Eckert



Ambassador Thomas Greminger: Proud of the Nepalese peace accord

It was a huge honour for Switzerland: when the renowned Department of Peace and Conflict Research of the University of Uppsala in Sweden conducted a survey to find out which countries and organisations were most frequently involved in conflict prevention and mediation, Switzerland ranked third behind the UN and the US as the most important mediator in small and medium-sized armed conflicts.

The findings come as no surprise to Ambassador Thomas Greminger, Head of Political Department IV Human Security of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA). He knows all about the services that Switzerland provides to the international community: "Switzerland's good deeds in the cause of peace-building are increasingly in demand," he says. According to Greminger, Switzerland's neutrality plays a secondary role. More important is the fact that Switzerland is a small, independent country without its own political agenda, pursuing no particular interests and posing no risk to anyone. Added to this is the extensive experience acquired by Swiss diplomats in their role as mediators, and their excellent track record in this field.

2006 was a successful year for Swiss peace and human rights policy. At various locations

around the world, Swiss diplomats and experts were able to contribute to the peaceful resolution of conflicts through mediation or expertise, for instance in Nepal, where a peace accord ended the ten-year conflict between Maoist rebels and the king. Elsewhere in the world, too, Switzerland played a key role in peace processes, for example in the Middle East, in southern Sudan, Uganda, Burundi, Indonesia, Mexico, Guatemala and Kosovo.

How does Switzerland become involved in such efforts, and where and why is Switzerland active in the cause of peace? Does it start with a request from a party to a conflict? Thomas Greminger explains: "Naturally we can't just sit in our offices and wait for requests for assistance. Peace-building is a market in which many players operate. And if you want to be successful, you have to be better than the others and present arguments and ideas that are compelling and convincing. It's important that contacts already exist with the country or with individuals." Switzerland is therefore mainly involved in areas where it operates development projects, knows the political and social situation, and maintains good relations with institutions and individuals. These, ac-

ording to Ambassador Greminger, are ideal springboards for peace-building efforts.

For the past two years, the DFA has been in the process of gradually focusing its activities in the field of peace and human rights. By closing down various regional activities (in Mozambique, Angola, Myanmar, Mexico and Guatemala), the Department was able to pool its resources. By the end of 2007, the DFA aims to have concentrated up to 80 per cent of its bilateral peace-making activities on seven priority regions: Nepal, Sri Lanka, south-eastern Europe, the Great Lakes region (Rwanda, Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo), Colombia, the Middle East and Sudan. This will allow synergies between the government's various foreign-policy instruments – development cooperation, humanitarian aid, human rights policy, civil and military peace promotion – to be better exploited.

The Berne offices of Political Department IV employ some 70 staff. Additional experts work in the assignment areas, acting as election observers, monitoring compliance with human rights, mediating or providing assistance on constitutional law. The Federal Council has sought parliamentary approval for a budget of CHF 240 million for Political Department IV for the years 2008 to 2011. "I'm optimistic that Parliament will recognise our work and that we can continue it under the terms of the relevant federal law," says Thomas Greminger.

Greminger is particularly proud of the peace accord in Nepal. Since Switzerland has maintained a presence in Nepal for the past 50 years or so through its cooperation on development, it was able to draw on an extensive network of contacts and in-depth knowledge of the country. The November 2006 peace accord, which ended a bloody civil war that had claimed 13,000 lives, owes its success largely to the discreet advisory and mediation services provided by Switzerland which, due to its long presence in the country, not only won the trust of the opposing parties, but also had detailed knowledge about the political situation.

As Ambassador Greminger explains, it is not possible to disclose information about all Switzerland's good deeds, since discretion is a key factor. Some mediation processes have to be conducted in secret for years because the parties would immediately abandon them if they became public.