Conflict Early Warning: Warning Who?

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This article has two purposes. The first is to challenge the way we think about early warning of emerging conflicts. We typically "wire" that warning toward ourselves so we can take action. But we have given much less thought to *also* warning those who are about to be attacked.

The second purpose is to introduce readers to a new form of aid that can be deployed when civilians trapped in conflict are dying and the chance of reaching them in time with conventional relief and protection is unlikely. It is called Locally-Led Advance Mobile Aid (LLAMA). As one of its many functions LLAMA can help threatened populations build local early warning networks.

If readers agree that it makes sense to wire warning not just toward ourselves but also toward a population in imminent danger, then they will find in LLAMA a vehicle for laying that wire.

Overestimating ourselves. Who is most motivated to respond to warnings? The endangered population. Who is best positioned in terms of local knowledge and tactical options to react to warnings immediately? The endangered population. Where do the earliest relief resources consistently come from? The lending, remittance, solidarity and faith-based networks of the endangered population. But to whom do we wire warning of impending threats? From where do we suppose the first emergency response will come? Ourselves.

Perhaps ninety-nine percent of what we read about conflict early warning refers to regional or international mechanisms. They are egocentric in that they are primarily built by outsiders to be used by outsiders. As Howard Adelman says, "The quest for defining 'early warning' is an exercise in understanding how what is happening over there comes to be known by us 'over here.'" [1] We quickly fall, James Darcy says, into discussing our role as external protectors, neglecting to consider how the people themselves try to physically avoid threats. [2]

The fundamental orientation is that we are the rescuers; that aid does not start until we arrive. And the question of *how we can arrive in time* (if at all) creates immediate problems. One author complains, "An early warning system is only relevant if there is also an early action system. The problem is that early action is contingent upon transcending the limitations imposed by overlapping UN mandates, conflicting agency cultures, political pressures, [and] sovereign interests… From where, one asks, can such action emanate?" [3] This article holds that action can and does come from the threatened populations themselves.

We do try at times to involve resident civilians in our risk assessments given the invaluable contributions they can make. Yet when we do ask locals such as journalists or rights workers to provide warning—our aim usually is to have them disseminate it to *us*

so *we* can respond. It is indeed important to get the word out, but it is not enough. Sounding an alarm outside does not help civilians inside take steps to avoid the threat. True, we sometimes tie these assessments to community-level conflict prevention efforts. For example, aid agencies sometimes respond to observed risks by locally promoting rights, reconciliation, and peace building. But efforts at conflict *prevention* are entirely different than efforts at conflict *preparedness*. When the former fails—as it very often does—the latter is needed.

Beyond those limited efforts at collaboration we tend to "confuse detachment from communities with neutrality" and miss their potential for local warning and response. [4] "Representatives from the threatened population are often excluded [from protection assessments] on the grounds that their participation may jeopardize their own security, undermine the [foreign] team's neutrality, or compromise confidentiality." [5] Security is indeed a concern *if* our primary purpose for early warning is to contain or control the abusers. That can put any local counterparts in a dangerous position. "The standard approach of fact-finding and denunciation leaves less scope for indigenous organizations; the more sensitive and adversarial nature of human rights activities has also placed serious limitations on the involvement of indigenous organizations." [6] It seems our singular goal is to influence these dangerous and recalcitrant groups—which has proven notoriously hard. But what about an effort to inform the people threatened by those groups?
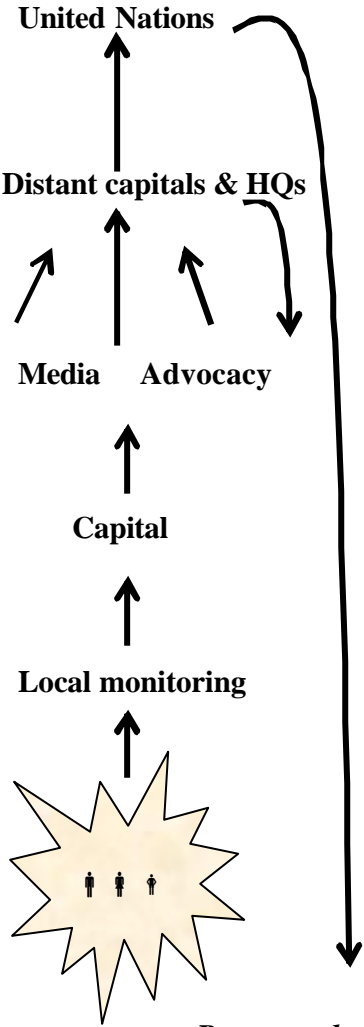
Is conflict early warning wired in the wrong direction? Conventional conflict warning is "wired vertically". It gets word about abuse *up* to higher powers so that pressure can then be brought back *down* on the abusers. Rarely have we invested in routing the alarm locally or "laterally". Perhaps the crux of the issue is: *who do we assume is in the best position to act on information in a timely, lifesaving way?*

Today's prominent systems for warning about violence are designed to trigger this response from the outside to a growing crisis. Do these early warnings ever serve to get endangered civilians physically away from danger? Alerts, bulletins, and reports are sent around the world in real time. Yet they rarely touch ground where the killing happens. They fly through cyberspace, high over the victims' heads. People at risk on the ground might never learn that the "demarches" we write on their behalf even exist.

This might be a better way of saying it: Warning that is meant to control groups which are causing harm is wired up and out—while warning meant to get innocents out of harm's way is wired along the ground. In terms of getting warning everywhere it is needed, the conventional "superstructure" and LLAMA "substructure" can greatly complement each other.
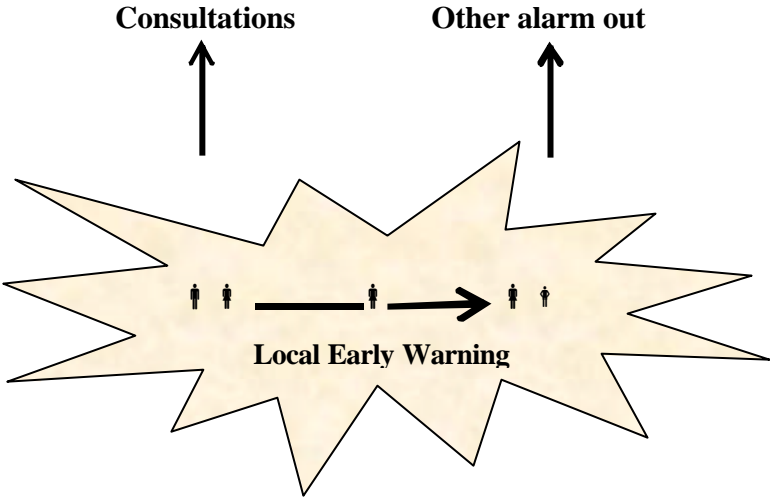
Flow of Warning and Response in Conflict

Conventional

United Nations

Distant capitals & HQs

Media   **Advocacy**

Capital

Local monitoring

*Pressure abusive powers
on the ground:
May take weeks, months, or years*

LLAMA

Consultations   **Other alarm out**

Local Early Warning

*Evade abusive powers
on the ground:
May take hours or minutes*

Would it not make sense to focus more effort on a warning capacity *within* the killing grounds? Why not help put information apparatus directly in the hands of those who are threatened? They are more motivated than anyone else to act. They are more familiar with many details of the killing zone than anyone else. They are the most logical end-users of warning because steps they can take in a matter of hours or minutes save lives. This is the very purpose of standard immediate action drills for threat response. Warning for people on the ground is physically *actionable*.

Translation: civilians need to save themselves. They should assume international warning and response networks might never save them. History bears this out—and buries many of those who hoped and waited for our rescue.

Five years after rescue-from-above failed to materialize in Rwanda, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee issued a policy paper with the same rather egocentric view of protection. It directed that, "Where [human rights] violations… occur, field staff of UN agencies, NGOs and international organizations should ensure that the information is communicated to officials and/or institutions that are in a position to act on it. These include the HC/RC, the OHCHR, the ICRC or UN agencies with a special expertise or responsibility in this field." When monitoring "groups that are particularly at risk," the paper added, "the HC/RC and Country Team will relay such information to the ERC, RSG on IDPs, OHCHR, and the IASC-WG as a whole, in order to ensure a timely and effective response." [9] Is it really timely and effective to pass life-saving information up a bureaucracy of acronyms—but not to the people whose lives are actually at risk? The IASC document repeatedly states the importance of getting information about threats to those with "competent authority", "special expertise" and "the mandate" to deal with protection. It seems to imply that civilians lack the authority, mandate, and expertise to save their own lives.

And five years after this policy paper, amid the Darfur crisis, life and death warning was again being wired vertically. The UN approved a "joint" protection strategy [10] that included no discernable mention of how the civilians themselves could anticipate and avoid danger. The document's section on Information Management asserts that, "Collecting and analyzing reliable and well-corroborated information in a timely manner

is the cornerstone of any meaningful protection strategy." But it then goes on to say that this "allows for political action and initiatives, and high-level advocacy, including reporting to international fora." [11] (The use of intelligence for such "macro" purposes is important. But information gathering at the "micro" level—for example, on the perimeter of a village or encampment, or along the route of a hazardous movement—may easily save more lives in the end.)

As it has played out, a key protection component in our response to Darfur (besides the thinly-spread African Union's force) has been the creation of "protection working groups". The PWGs are typically comprised of humanitarian NGOs and UN agencies. In the view of one journal, these PWGs "have fed solid analysis into reports to the UN secretary General and the Security Council, as well as other international missions, helping to keep protection issues on the international political agenda, where it is much needed." [12] While these protection warnings certainly were needed in international fora—they also are needed by Darfurians who continue to be attacked. (True, some of the agencies that are PWG members also have their own programs on the ground which engage the displaced population in protection efforts. But the piece of ground they work on is very small; most of Darfur is a "no-go" zone for them.)

Other recent efforts to improve civilian protection by reforming early warning apparatus seem to reinforce the vertical wiring already in place. [13] Even one of the most thorough protection studies thus far focused on how to better engage host country leaders at the national level, as well as aid and diplomatic officials at the international level. It explicitly identified them as people "in a position to act" (and thus implicitly as people who would make the best end-users of emerging evidence about violence). [14]

To be clear, these reform efforts are vital and should continue. They might motivate aid institutions and governments to confront abusive powers sooner. They might mobilize that much-lauded foreign "presence" on the ground that could deter abuses. But there will always be limits to international warning and response. There will always be times when outside entities lack the means or even the desire to confront abusers. There will always be times when a lack of security prevents them from inserting that protective "presence" on the ground. Thus, despite their power and prestige, they should not automatically be seen as the best or the only end-users of early warning information.

Local Early Warning. Local early warning runs laterally; it is sent to people in the path of approaching violence. The idea is not new—it borrows from the field of natural disaster response where "people-centered early warning systems" are a rising priority. "What is needed are systems that are tailored for local use and [are] generated on site." [15] When civilians are forewarned about potential attack or abuse, they can better prepare their own evasive protection and discreet relief.

> *"Knowing your adversary is the first rule of successful military engagement.*
> *The same is true for relief work."* [16]

This is one of the many examples in which what is true for combatants is also true for endangered civilians merely trying to survive. "Success in counter-guerrilla operations almost invariably goes to the force which receives timely [local] information." [17] Timely information—wired in the right direction—saves lives.

What does the wiring for local early warning look like? It will not be hard for the reader to recognize. It comes from experience ("best practice") that has been proven to save lives countless times in countless places: picket lines, patrols, observation and listening posts, open sources, informants, and simple "signals intelligence" all tied to contingency plans. The basic field craft underlying this is information gathering and communications, as well as safe encampment, movement, and threat response.

Who can help lay this wiring? *We* often find it impossible to reach threatened populations in time. And *they* are often too overwhelmed to devise this level of tactical planning by themselves. The one logical answer is to help form teams of locals who have been recruited, trained, equipped, and deployed back home to help them do these things. There are many precedents for raw civilians mastering such basic defensive measures. This would be one of LLAMA's primary purposes.

Act on the warning. Mere warning is not enough. Just as we have seen at the international level, warning needs to be met with the will to respond in an effective way. Thus the earlier claim that locals are 'the most motivated to respond' needs a stipulation. There are psychological forces at play. Survivor testimonies from around the world show that civilians frequently do not prepare themselves for danger even when forewarned. There are two primary reasons for this, and LLAMA would be well positioned to address them both.

First, they often do not believe their own government or their own countrymen will kill them. They do not recognize "rumors" as truth until it is too late. But people will trust what they hear from their own kin and see with their own eyes. LLAMA teams would therefore escort survivors of neighboring violence to meet with those who have not yet experienced that violence so they can tell their stories. When there are kinship ties to these visitors, their stories are even more convincing. These testimonials are reinforced with any information, particularly video images, that LLAMA can collect. Alternatively, LLAMA teams can escort representatives *into* a conflicted or "pacified" zone so they may learn first-hand what has been happening. They are more persuaded of danger by actually seeing burned villages, destroyed crops, and mass graves. This is simply a variation of the standard UN-escorted "Go and see" visits that are intended to persuade refugees it is safe to *go* home. But in this case the message that representatives bring back might be: it is not safe to *stay* home.

Second, they often do not see any alternative to hoping they can accommodate the belligerents or thugs coming their way. Sometimes that might be their safest option. But it is important that they more fully understand the risks and options at hand. Flight could be safer and more sustainable than they realize. It often can be made so by assuming a more optimal group profile and learning basic field craft. There is plenty of painful

experience available; there is no reason they should go through survival's deadly learning curve without the benefit of those hard-earned lessons. They can, for example, learn what dispersed and hidden livelihoods look like. They can be shown how they might "dismantle their village homes and build temporary huts near their fields" as the Vietnamese sometimes did in the face of American airpower. [18] Or see crop colors and canopies that are less noticeable from the air, as Salvadoran peasants sometimes planted.[19]

They can be taught more ways to keep their family units and economic assets intact.

These measures are not designed to create panic or false assurance. The "healthy fear" that people gain about an approaching threat is channeled. The message is that danger is coming, but there are steps they can take.

Of course, endangered people usually start taking such steps on their own. They have social strategies based on affinity, economic strategies based on adaptation, and security strategies based either on anonymity or accommodation. Locally-led teams would be best suited to recognize and support any positive survival strategies the civilians are attempting.

What all of this shows is that local early warning is not enough. It also needs trusted corroboration and a range of realistic responses, including support for any wise measures already underway. And it all needs to be done whether or not our conventional machinery for relief and protection ever arrives.

> *"If we accept that access will not happen on day one, and in places like Sudan might not happen at all, the work needs to take place in advance: strengthening coping mechanisms, preparing the interface for [a day when] the heavy humanitarian machinery comes rolling in."*
> *Andrew Bonwick* [20]

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LLAMA. The question of early warning and *who* is in the best position to act on it is terribly important by itself regardless of any thoughts about LLAMA. But if we conclude that we have been mistaken by not wiring an alarm toward the people at risk—then we may immediately see the value of something like LLAMA to "lay the wires".

Based on ample (but scattered) doctrine and precedent, these local teams are recruited, trained, and equipped by the LLAMA organization, with discreet yet vital support from patrons in the aid community. In turn, LLAMA helps the aid community during its most difficult transitions and gaps in emergency response. Why haven't we thought of something like LLAMA before? Perhaps it's because we have only imagined that aid begins when we arrive.

Three years of research under the auspices of The Cuny Center have culminated in a detailed monograph on this archetypal form of aid. It is available to the public and can be obtained by contacting the center's research fellow Casey Barrs at cbarrs@mt.gov.

[1] Howard Edelman, "Defining Humanitarian Early Warning", Chapter 1 in *Early Warning and Early Response*, Susanne Schmeidl and Howard Adelman, eds., Columbia International Affairs Online, 1998; p. 2 of the chapter.

[2] James Darcy, talking points for presentation at the Wilton Park conference, West Sussex, February 2005; p. 1.

[3] Sharon Ru su, "Early Warning and Information: The Role of ReliefWeb", Chapter 5 in *Early Warning and Early Response*, Susanne Schmeidl and Howard Adelman, eds., Columbia International Affairs Online, 1998; p. 3 of the chapter.

[4] Sue Lautze and Dr. John Hammock, *Coping with Crisis, Coping with Aid: Capacity Building, Coping Mechanisms and Dependency, Linking Relief and Development*, for the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee, by The International Famine Center, Tufts University, Medford, MA, December 1996; p. 15.

[5] Mark Frohardt, Diane Paul and Larry Minear, *Protecting Human Rights: The Challenge to Humanitarian Organizations*, Occasional Paper #35, the Thomas J. Watson Jr. Institute for International Studies, Brown University, Providence, 1999; p. 34.

[6] Larry Minear, *Partnerships in Protection: An Overview of Emerging Issues and Work in Progress*, an independent background paper prepared for the UNHCR Conference on Strengthening Collaboration with Humanitarian and Human Rights NGOs in Support of the International Refugee Protection System, Council of Foreign Relations, New York City, March 11-12 1999; p. 6.

[7] Claude Bruderlein and Fleur Johns, *Inter-Agency Expert Consultation on Protected Areas*, Harvard University, 23-24 February, 1999; p. 12.

[8] Michael Montgomery and Stephan Smith, producers, *The Few Who Stayed: Defying Genocide in Rwanda*, Frontline, Public Broadcasting Service, April, 2004; pp. 3 and 8 of transcript.

[9] *Protection of Internally displaced Persons*, Policy Paper, Inter-Agency standing Committee, New York, December, 1999; pp. 6-7 and 10.

[10] *Protection of Civilians: A Strategy for Darfur*, 26 October 2004. This strategy document resulted from "a consultative and fully collaborative effort of a cross-section of UN Country Team agencies [and protection working gro ups]. It has been approved as the UN's "joint overall protection strategy for Darfur." P. 2. The document contains one fragmentary reference to "building local capacity" and two to "civil society" but with no elaboration.

[11] *Protection of Civilians: A Strategy for Darfur*, 26 October 2004. This strategy document resulted from "a consultative and fully collaborative effort of a cross-section of UN Country Team agencies [and protection working groups]. P. 8.

[12] Victoria Wheeler, "Politics and Practice: The Limits of Humanitarian Protection in Darfur", *Humanitarian Exchange*, No. 30, Humanitarian Practice Network, Overseas Development Institute, London, June 2005; p. 13.

[13] See generally: Simon Bagshaw and Diane Paul, *Protect or Neglect? Toward a More Effective United Nations Approach to the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons*, the Brookings-SAIS Project on Internal Displacement and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Inter-Agency Internal Displacement Division, November 2004. **See also:** Kofi Annan, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict*, S/2005/740, 28 November 2005; pp. 14, 15 and 16. The "Monitoring and reporting" section of the secretary-general's report cites some initiatives underway. It notes that a number of UN missions are establishing "incident-reporting systems and databases that will be drawn on" for reports to the Security Council. It also notes that OCHA will start a pilot for data collection on violence against civilians. The secretary-general urges "it be a matter of practice" for protection-related incidents to "be reported on regularly to the Council." He concludes saying "this capacity to collate all necessary information concerning the protection of civilians… will prove to be essential in ensuring a clear focus on protection that can be reflected throughout the work and deliberations of the Council." **See also:** Elisabeth Rehn and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, *Women, War and Peace: The Independent Experts Assessment of the Impact of Armed Conflict on Women and Women's Roles in Peace-building*, UNIFEM, 2002. On p. 121, the report's findings call for "The systematic collection of information and data [about women in conflict] by all actors... This information should be provided on a regular basis to the secretariat, member states, intergovernmental bodies, regional organizations, NGOs and other relevant bodies." One can find or

infer nowhere in this report the idea that civilians themselves would be "relevant" end-users of these warnings.

[14] Simon Bagshaw and Diane Paul, *Protect or Neglect? Toward a More Effective United Nations Approach to the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons*, the Brookings-SAIS Project on Internal Displacement and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Inter-Agency Internal Displacement Division, November 2004. Page 95 seems to reinforce the conventional omission regarding civilians as appropriate end-users of early warning information, saying "In short, there are significant numbers of persons in the field in daily contact with displaced people and other communities who possess information on the situation, and the problems and needs of people at risk. The problem is that the information often does not reach those *who can act on it*. Access to credible and verified information [would] allow [UN] Humanitarian Coordinators / Resident Coordinators to identify trends and patterns and provide them with solid information on which to base advocacy efforts. It [would] provide an important opportunity to engage the High Commissioner… and the Representative of the Secretary General… as well as the diplomatic and donor community." [Italics added] This is reinforced on p. 60, which says "There is need to establish a system that requires field staff to convey information about protection to *those in a position to act* in order to improve the chances for identifying the location and timing of future violations. An effective system can stimulate the development of protective strategies , such as increasing international presence, requesting members of the diplomatic community or senior UN officials to intercede with the relevant authorities..." [Italics added] And again on p. 96, which says "[Monitoring and reporting on trends of abuse] enhances opportunities to take preventive measures, such as increasing international presence in a given area, or requesting members of the diplomatic community and officials at headquarters to intercede with the relevant authorities." Perhaps the closest that this report comes to including civilians as part of early warning is on p. 30, in its discussion of a collaborative approach. It notes, "Providing assistance and protection in situations of internal displacement will not therefore involve one agency, but a range of actors—government officials, UN agencies, international organizations, and international a*nd local NGOs*." [Italics added] But this is followed only by general references to supporting "local capacity". Discussion elsewhere in the report about helping local human rights monitors might be an indication of what is meant by supporting local capacity. But again, the strong tendency is to "wire" the information from local human rights organizations toward outside groups (in media, advocacy and diplomatic circles). None of this seems to explicitly help civilians receive and respond to early warning.

[15] Tim Large, *Early Warning Needs Communities on Board* , AlertNet, Reuters Foundation, 21 January 2005; pp. 1and 2 of article.

[16] Philippe Le Billon (with Joanna Macrae, Nick Leader and Roger East), *The Political Economy of War: What Relief Agencies Need to Know*, Humanitarian Practice Network, <u>Network Paper</u> 33, July 2000; p. 27.

[17] Leroy Thompson, *The Counter Insurgency Manual*, Greenhill Books, London, 2002; p. 52. The author is quoting the US Army Manual, Counterguerrilla Operations, FM-31-16.

[18] Barton Meyers, *Vietnamese Defense against Aerial Attack* , paper presented at the 1996 Vietnam Symposium, Center for the Study of the Vietnam Conflict, Lubbock, TX, April 19, 1996; p. 3.

[19] Brian Martin, *Technology for Non-Violent Struggle*, London, War Resisters' International, 2001; p. 2 of Chapter Eight. Found at: www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/pubs/01tnvs/tnvs08.html.

[20] Andrew Bonwick, *Access to Pro tect*, Overseas Development Institute, Humanitarian Protection Network, April 22, 2003, p. 2. See: www.odihpn.org.