

ASIA PACIFIC CENTRE - RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT

MASS ATROCITY EARLY WARNING IN THE UN SECRETARIAT:

A BRIEF APPRAISAL



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Mass Atrocity Early Warning in the UN Secretariat: A brief appraisal

Over the last 35 years, there has been a substantial increase in the capacity for the UN Secretariat to carry out mass atrocity early warning. However, such improvements do not correspond to better prevention or reaction by the international community. The evolution of mass atrocity early warning capacity within the Secretariat was motivated by profound failures to prevent catastrophes in the 1990s, such as Rwanda's 1994 genocide and the genocide in Srebrenica in the following year. Since that time, the UN has advanced its early warning capacity by increasing personnel and refining its analytical understanding of risk. But how have these changes contributed to the UN's record as a preventive actor? This policy brief is part of a British-Academy funded project. This briefing draws from a journal article published in [International Peacekeeping](#).

What is Early Warning?

Early warning consists of three components: the gathering of information, analysis, and conveying findings to decision-makers.¹ The focal point of these three activities within the United Nations is the Secretariat, predominantly based at its New York headquarters. Offices such as the Department for Peacebuilding and Political Affairs, the Department of Peace Operations, the Joint Office for Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, are all committed in some way to these three components of early warning.

A History of Early Warning in the UN Secretariat

Numerous offices and departments have been tasked with one or a combination of the three aspects of early warning since the late 1980s. Originally designed for conflict early warning, Office for the Collection of Information (ORCI) was established in 1988, but closed four years later after resource constraints severely limited its functions. Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali revived these functions in the Department of Political Affairs in 1994, but the siloed nature of Secretariat departments at the time meant that information coming from UN staffers around the world did not always reach the right people.² For example, alarming warnings about an impending genocide in Rwanda conveyed by UNAMIR commander Romeo Dallaire, remained within the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, and was not conveyed to the Secretary-General, or the Security Council.³

Since the late 1980s, the Secretariat has developed its capacity for early warning, initially for conflict more broadly, but also developing specific analytical capacity for the four atrocity crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and ethnic cleansing. The Department of Peacebuilding and Political Affairs (DPPA – formerly DPA) is regarded as the focal point for information collection, anal-

ysis and communication.⁴ It contains regional desks, with staffers assigned to different desks in order to monitor ongoing situations of heightened risk. As the DPO and OCHA have extensive contacts from various missions around the world, the challenge is for these and other offices to share information and collaborate on analysis. Recently with current Secretary-General Guterres' reforms, the DPO and the DPPA now share an open plan workspace in order to mitigate against earlier tendencies of siloing.⁵

Over the last ten years, the Joint Office has refined its analytical lens to convey risk in relation specifically to atrocity crimes. The Framework of analysis was released in 2014 and highlights structural and proximate conditions that identify risk that is distinct from conflict more generally.⁶

Four Case Studies

How have these developments in early warning for mass atrocities impacted the UN's effectiveness as a prevention actor? Four cases over four different decades provides some indications of this evolution.

Rwanda 1994

The genocide in Rwanda did not occur without forewarning. The structural conditions of discrimination and persecution of Tutsis by Hutu elites was flagged as possibly 'genocidal' in character in a UN Human Rights Commission report in 1993.⁷ In January 1994, Head of the peacekeeping mission, Romeo Dallaire received information that weapons were being stockpiled by Hutu militia group, the *Interwamwe*, ahead

of plans to commit ethnic cleansing against the Tutsis.⁸ Clearly there was no lack of compelling information. But the DPO and the DPA did not contain the structural or the analytical capacity to understand this information in terms of genocide risk, and as a consequence did not convey the gravity of the situation to the Secretary-General or the Security Council.⁹ The Human Rights report was not shared with other departments.

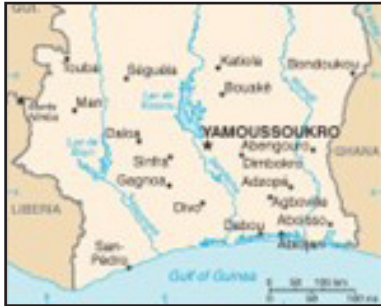
Darfur 2003-4



There was a serious lack of early warning in Darfur. There was such a profound lack of information that hardly anyone outside of Sudan was aware that conflict was raging in that region. This is partly due to the

remoteness of Darfur, and the limited presence of international actors (including UN actors) in early 2003.¹⁰ Analysis was an issue even after credible information of violence against civilians was mounting. OCHA and DPPA were at odds, OCHA arguing it was a political crisis, and DPPA arguing it was localised tribal violence.¹¹ These disagreements meant that there were two different arguments that different member states could side with, further contributing to delays in response.

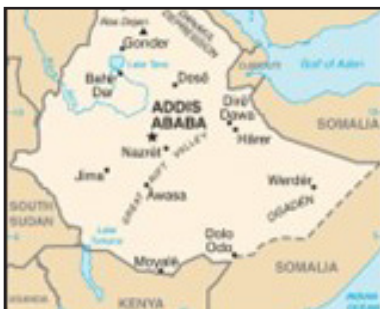
Côte d'Ivoire 2010-11



The post-election violence that erupted in Côte d'Ivoire in late 2010 unfolded rapidly and looked likely to lead towards mass atrocities. The violence that unfolded in the early months of 2011 led to three

major responses from the UN Security Council – the first authorising a further 2000 personnel to aid the existing peace operation; the second authorising a three-month extension to all personnel.¹² Finally, on March 30, Resolution 1975 authorised “all means necessary” to protect civilians under immediate threat of violence.¹³ This was preceded by early warning analysis (led by the Joint Office) which for the first time was specific to mass atrocities.¹⁴ The information was conveyed within the Secretariat and released through public statements. In this case, improvements in the analytical capacity for mass atrocity early warning was influential in the timely international responses that followed.

Ethiopia 2020-21



The civil war in Ethiopia that started in November 2020 was characterised by systematic atrocity crimes. Despite this, there was very little international response. This was despite the fact that the Secretariat had been

aware of the risk of mass atrocities in the country, well before conflict had broken out.¹⁵ A more refined analytical lens in the Joint Office; frequent UN Human Rights reports flagging risk; and a more robust internal system of information sharing and analysis through the regional quarterly reviews all contributed to better early warning.¹⁶ As the war commenced, the Joint Office released a statement listed a number of concerning developments that “constitutes a dangerous trajectory that heightens the risk of...atrocity crimes”.¹⁷ Despite having the most specific warning of all four cases presented here, the international response was the poorest, with mention of

the conflict being brought up in “any other business” at Security Council meetings.¹⁸ In the case of Ethiopia, the problem was less early warning, and more response – the information in the lead-up to conflict and atrocities was accurate, as was the analysis. But the response was poor.

Conclusion

In many ways, early warning is the heartbeat of prevention within the UN Secretariat. It is the culmination of information gathered from the field by numerous UN (and other) sources. This information is then distilled through analysis for its risk in connection to atrocity crimes before being conveyed to decisionmakers. This three-pronged process has sharpened over the decades, and has never been stronger. However, the international community’s record for timely response to scenarios of escalating risk and impending violence has been poor. The four cases in this article – taken from four different decades starting with the 1990s – reveal a very mixed picture. In 1994 and 2003, lacklustre and delayed responses to atrocities in Rwanda and Darfur were partly a product of poor early warning. In 2011, a more robust and refined early warning geared more specifically towards atrocity crimes was part of a timely response that halted atrocities. Yet even with the most developed analytical capacity and clear warning, the international community turned its back on Ethiopia in 2020. Sadly, the last decade of international reaction to escalating risk looks more like Ethiopia than it does Côte d’Ivoire.¹⁹ More research is needed to better understand the nexus between UN early warning and international response – on a case-by-case basis – to better understand why the will to prevent and respond has decreased in inverse proportion to our knowledge of mass atrocity risk escalation.

Endnotes

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