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THE UNITED NATIONS: ENHANCING ITS EARLY-WARNING MECHANISM

BY

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The United Nations (UN) cannot effectively monitor regional stability or provide advance notification of impending conflict or crisis. To do this, there must be an early warning mechanism to provide advance notice. For the most part, this involves a capability to acquire, analyze and distribute the type of information which can trigger concurrent activities such as decision making at the political and strategic levels, contingency planning, and the implementation process. The UN's problem is not the absence of information. Rather, it is the absence of an organization to manage the information flow, linking early warning to the other processes crucial to rapid reaction. To be effective, this early warning mechanism must be linked to individuals and organizations capable of acting on such information.
Introduction

"As Secretary-General of the United Nations...I have often encountered two insuperable obstacles: one, the claim of Governments that the Secretary-General has no right to interfere in their internal affairs or in matters pertaining to their national sovereignty; and two, the lack of authoritative information, without which the Secretary-General cannot speak."¹

Secretary-General U Thant, 30 March 1971

The United Nations (UN) and in particular the Secretary-General, requires accurate, detailed and up-to-date information to fulfill the mandate (Article 1, UN Charter) of maintaining international peace, security, and preventing conflict. Currently, the UN cannot effectively monitor the international community and lacks sufficient organizational competency to conduct information gathering and analysis.

The UN's problem is not the absence of information. Rather, it is the absence of a path for information to flow, linking early warning to the other processes crucial to rapid action, especially political decision-making and contingency planning. Early warning should be a crucial first step to enable the political and strategic levels to be appraised of a situation and to implement measures before a crisis erupts.²

This paper will: briefly trace actions by the Secretary-General with regard to early warning from a historical perspective; outline past attempts to develop and enhance an early-warning system through organizational change; discuss the current organization and process and its limitations, and finally; recommend enhancements to the existing UN situation center.
Historical Examples of Early-Warning:

A Perspective

The Secretary-General has responsibility for bringing matters to the attention of the Security Council. Article 99 of the Charter, states “the Secretary-General may bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security.” In practice, the Secretary-General, is reliant upon multiple organizations providing accurate information and successful early warning many times depends on the timeliness of the information.

UN history is replete with cases where the organization was unable to gain access to information it was seeking, and as a result, was unable to provide early warning. A prominent case is the failed early warning of the outbreak of the Korean War. In 1948, the UN General Assembly mandated the United Nations Commission on Korea (UNCOK) to report on “developments which might lead to military conflict” on the peninsula. In the months prior to the attack in 1950, the Commission heard many allegations by senior South Korean officials of an imminent invasion by the North, based on information and analysis. However, the South Korean sources were not considered objective. On 30 May 1950, General William Roberts, head of the US Korean Military Advisory Group, reported: “There is no build-up of North Korean military forces along the thirty-eighth parallel at the present” and that it was “as safe in Korea as in the United States.” As a result, the UN joined the USA in being caught off-guard in Korea only a few weeks later.
The Korean invasion is a case of “late warning.” It was not until seven hours after the attack began that Secretary-General Trygve Lie first learned of it, through a midnight phone call from a US Assistant Secretary of State. The Secretary-General then requested and obtained confirmation of the attack from UNCOK before relating the news to the Security Council later that day. He then pronounced North Korea in violation of the UN Charter and called for Security Council action. This intervention of the Secretary-General, using information corroborated by an objective source (UNCOK), caused some otherwise skeptical delegates to vote for the Council resolutions to restrain, and later to repel, the North Korean forces.  

In retrospect, unavailable technology and human error created an informational gap for the UN. This in turn caused the Secretary-General to misunderstand North Korean intentions and receive late confirmation of the attack. In today’s world, with sophisticated intelligence satellites, achieving the element of surprise for a massive invasion would be much more difficult.  

Other cases of unsuccessful early warning are easily identified. During the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956-57, the UN attempted unsuccessfully to dispatch an informational gathering team. The puppet government being installed in Hungary immediately claimed full sovereignty and in the face of the Soviet military grip on the state, the UN could do little. In 1968, Secretary-General U Thant first learned of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia on his car radio. His efforts to get a “foot in the door” with a fact-finding team ran into problems and ultimately failed.
Even when the UN has fact-finding teams inside a country, the UN can be narrowly confined in its information gathering rendering the effort ineffective. During the months prior to the 1994 Rwandan holocaust, the commander of the UN peacekeeping force in Rwanda (UNAMIR), Canadian Gen. Romeo Dallaire, received secret communications from moderates in the Rwandan army alleging that plots were being made by members of President Habyarimana’s entourage. Although, UNAMIR was supposed to monitor the security situation, the peacekeepers lacked the capabilities to investigate or corroborate secret plans, even for mass genocide. In an effort to inquire into the situation, UN representatives were misled by seemingly innocent members of the government, hence access to accurate information was unavailable. Throughout the steady deterioration in Rwandan, UN representatives headed by Gen. Dallaire, complained about inaccessibility to information. In this case, had UNAMIR provided sound evidence to the UN Secretary-General for presentation to the Security Council at a much earlier date, it is possible that early warning may have attenuated the massive tragedy.

There have been some positive examples of the UN successfully providing on-site investigations providing accurate information to the Secretary-General. Countries sometimes feel wrongly accused or seek objective international verification of their claims. This was the case in 1958, when both Laos and Lebanon asked the Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjold to send teams to investigate alleged large-scale infiltration across their borders from Vietnam and Syria, receptively. In both instances, the UN observers were unable to verify the claims, and it soon became apparent that the claims
arose from domestic politics. The UN played an important role in confidence building, by showing fears were unfounded.¹³

UN success monitoring regional problems depends on an intricate layering of 39 separate organizations and a complex communication system none of which report to one central authority. The UN’s problem is not the absence of information. Rather, it is the absence of a path that centrally manages the flow, enabling the Secretary-General to receive accurate and timely information.
The Office For Research and The Collection of Information (ORCI):

A New Organization

Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar, in speeches and statements between 1982 and 1985, presented the case for the further development of early-warning activities in the United Nations. In a report which he submitted to the General Assembly in 1987, entitled, “Perspectives for the 1900’s,” the Secretary-General again made the case for the further development of early-warning activities at the United Nations. He stated, “Nowhere, is the saying that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure more true than in the field of international security, especially since the cure for conflict has proven so elusive. The United Nations must, therefore give very high priority in the 1990’s to monitoring potential causes of conflict and to communicating warning signs to those in a position to alleviate the situation.”

Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar took an active role in efforts to develop the early-warning capacity of the United Nations. Invoking Article 99 as a legal basis, Cuellar wanted to develop a wider and more systematic capacity for fact-finding in potential conflict areas.

On 1 March 1987, a new office was established under the direct supervision of the Secretary-General. The organization was called the Office for Research and the Collection of Information (ORCI). The purpose of this office was to ensure that pertinent organizations within the UN were provided with information necessary to assist in
responding to emerging situations or early signs of regional disputes. The objectives were: to keep the Secretary-General fully informed of international situations and trends; to ensure the Secretary-General was promptly provided with information to alert about emerging and current issues; finally, to provide the Secretary-General with accurate, timely and up-to-date information to aide in the early-warning process. The specific mandate entrusted to the ORCI was:

- To assess global trends;
- To prepare country, regional, and issue-related profiles in close consultation with officers negotiating conflict resolution functions in the Secretariat;
- To provide early-warning of developing situations requiring the secretary-general’s attention;
- To maintain current regional information in data systems using inside and outside data banks, as appropriate.
- To monitor factors related to possible refugee flows and comparable emergencies;
- To carry out ad hoc research and assessments for the immediate needs of the secretary-general;
- To receive, consolidate and distribute political information from the media and from the United Nations Information Centers on developments related to peace and security, for use by the secretary-general and his senior staff;
- To prepare and edit drafts of the secretary’s public statements, messages and reports.

The ORCI mandate provided the needed support the Secretary-General requires. It also gave him a functional “telescope” to peer out and overwatch regional area’s with some confidence.
The functions of the ORCI and its structure provided a valuable asset to the Secretary-General and a management mechanism to orchestrate information flow. Located in the political section of the Offices of the Secretary-General, its basic function was to provide early warning as a vital element in the Secretary-General’s preventive diplomacy and “in the exercise of his good offices,” in accordance with Articles 98 and 99 for the UN Charter.16

The ORCI was responsible for gathering information, conducting research, assessing global trends, and bringing potential trouble spots and critical security situations to the attention of the Secretary-General.

**The ORCI’s: Roles and Missions**

The ORCI employed 20 professionals and 20 research assistants or secretaries. The staff was carefully selected from experienced, high-caliber personnel. The office was segregated into four functional sections: the Planning and Research Coordination Section, the Regional Data Collection and Analysis Section, the News Distribution Section; and the Drafting Service Section. All sections were under the direct supervision of the Office of the Director

The Assistant-Secretary acts as primary advisor to the Secretary-General providing continuous regional updates. It was the intent for the Assistant-Secretary to interface, manage information flow, and coordinate departmental integration. Moreover, he was to oversee long-range research, analysis and information functions regarding
political affairs during emergency situations. Finally, the Assistant-Secretary coordinated special groups to work special interests topics for the Secretary-General.

The Director (DO) acts as the operations officer managing current and long range planning for the ORCI. His primary role is to supervise the planning for research and early warning functions and assists the Assistant-Secretary in providing executive direction to the activities of the Office.

The Planning and Research Coordination Section (PRCS) established and maintained a computerized system for storing and retrieving information. Additionally, the section provided guidance for the functions of the office, development and application of internal data sources, and determined use of selected public data banks. Furthermore, the PRCS provided guidance and managed the integration and maintenance of data in the information system to be established within the office. Within the ORCI, this section coordinated with outside institutes, associations, and universities to update information files.

The Regional Data Section (RDS) segregated into regional teams, provided advice, in conjunction with other departments dealing with political affairs, to the Secretary-General. This advice focused on day-to-day developments that might have had a bearing on peace and security in a particular region. The RDS followed the latest news in the region, developed background data, and analyzed in-country team reports. They also planned, conceptualized and prepared relevant data profiles, based on available public sources in consultation with political offices involved in negotiations and conflict resolutions.
Two other sections that participated in the management, coordination, and dissemination of information within the ORCI. The News Distribution Section and the Drafting Service. Closely associated with protocol functions, speech writing and briefing updates, the offices consolidated and distributed information, prepared regular summaries of media commentary concerning international developments, and prepared speeches in several official languages for the Secretary-General to make public statements.²¹

In 1991, the ORCI developed into a useful and functional office, but experienced problems acquiring computer equipment. Fiscal limitations hindered the offices’ ability to update its resources, books, periodicals, and audio visual equipment. The future of the office was in question and was directly linked to availability of resources.

The ORCI’s success was its ability to develop a good data base, create reliable early warning procedures and maintain the credibility and discretion of the research and analytical tasks given to it. There was a growing conviction that early warning and prevention action was a wave of the future. To date, the ORCI offices have either been dismantled or absorbed by other departments. Currently the office is not listed in the organizational directory for the United Nations.²²
What Makes-up the UN’s Early-Warning Mechanism?

The UN has access to information from many different sources. In addition to the international media and the diplomatic community, which is represented at the UN Headquarters in New York, the UN has a global network of programs, institutions and specialized agencies such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the World Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Health Environment Program (UNEP) and others, most of which have field offices throughout the world.23

Into this loose, unorganized network comes information from non-governmental organizations, most of which are represented in New York. Many have people in the field in other nations. Despite the traditional hesitancy to use “intelligence information”, some member states have begun sharing low-level or open-source intelligence information with the UN Secretariat. There is not a shortage of information available to the UN, and there are adequate avenues to provide the basis for early warning of impending regional crisis. But the UN does not have a formal early-warning system. Various parts of the Secretariat, such as the Department of Political Affairs (DPA) and the Department of Peackeeping Operations (DPKO), perform early warning functions which are loosely linked to the Situation Center and the Mission Planning Service.24

In 1993, the Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) started a two-year project on a Humanitarian Early-Warning System (HEWS), with the mandate of compiling information to identify potential crises.25 Initially, HEWS gathered
information on a few countries, but expanded its range of analysis to over 55 countries.\textsuperscript{26} The aim is to produce weekly general reports, early-warning signals and country profiles that will be shared with other departments such as DPA and DPKO. DPA is also working on a project to rationalize and coordinate the early-warning systems among DPA, DPKO and DHA. These three departments-known as the Triad-were created to function as crisis management and coordinating centers for the Secretary-General.\textsuperscript{27} The United States, Canada and other governments have actively supported these efforts to enhance the Secretariat's capacity. Even now some thought is being entertained to enlarge the circle of cooperation to include the Department for Economic and Social Information and Policy Analysis and focus all these activities in the Office of the Secretary-General.\textsuperscript{28}

Outside the Secretariat, various UN agencies, such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), have developed the equivalent of early-warning structures. UNHCR's Documentation Center in Geneva also prepares country profiles, similar to the HEWS system in DHA.\textsuperscript{29}

The UN's problem is not the absence of information. Rather, it is the absence of a path for information to flow, linking early-warning to the other processes crucial to rapid action. Early-warning and its associated by-products is being looked at by policy makers within the political structure and strategic level as a crucial step to alleviating crisis. Reforms within the UN Secretariat from 1993-1995 have taken the organization in the right direction. Although information sharing between UN headquarters and field operations in the past was inefficient, due to procedures, policy and operations
incompatibility problems the Secretary-General has addressed some information management problems with the establishment of the UN Situation Center.\textsuperscript{30}

The creation of the \textbf{Situation Center} provides a 24-hour operations center at the UN headquarters, specifically responsible for disseminating information. But the center only collects, prepares and distributes information. It does not have an analytical capability nor does the organization process detailed intelligence.

The situation center is responsible for a tracking, monitoring, and reporting on all UN peacekeeping operations. The center maintains communications via direct phone line and e-mail. Operating with 24 people (18 military and 6 civilian) the situation center provides a capability to collect and pass information within the UN Headquarters. The center does not function as a tactical operations center, it only responsible for disseminating information.\textsuperscript{31} The center reports to a wide variety of receivers depending upon the type and sensitivity of the information. In addition, the center must consider the serving country, political links and category, such as administrative or logistical information. It is resourced with automation equipment but does not have an automatic system linking the 17 field operating agencies into a network.\textsuperscript{32}

The UN does have a standing package of high-tech communications equipment, that can be deployed anywhere in the world with a fact-finding team of 20 to 30 people. This capability allows a team to establish real-time ground links and provide observations and information back to the UN. This package includes computers and satellite communications, but only an embryonic capability.\textsuperscript{33} Major problems exist with team deployments. Three different and distinct team chiefs accompany the team on a mission
and share assets. Representatives from the Secretary-General’s personal staff, the Military Advisors office and the chief Administrators office makeup the team leadership. Each team chief reports back to different offices within the UN and any coordination depend on interdepartmental communication, which often does not occur. At the present time, very little doctrine, standard operating procedure or integration exists to facilitate a smooth flow of information during crisis situations. The advantage the UN does have is that the high-tech equipment is owned by and at the disposal of the Secretary-General.

The myriad of organizations with internal early-warning systems, the mobile fact-finding team with high-tech equipment, and cooperative efforts, does not necessarily facilitate a unity of effort with regard to information collection and management. The Secretary-General still does not have an organization that rationalizes information through analytical and interpretive processes.

The Situation Center provides a nucleus for building such an organization but efforts are slow. Currently, there are several initiatives to enhance the UN’s early warning mechanism that are having positive effects. First, senior military officials are being selected to serve as advisors within the Secretariat (12 from the United States), a three star general from Germany and a two star from Norway, both experienced, no-nonsense soldiers. Second, there are attempts by the Secretariat to enhance the interpretive capabilities by using these experienced military staffers. Third there is a real effort to develop an intelligence sharing system, largely U.S. design. Last, there is a growing cognizance of a need to centralize the early-warning efforts.
In their present states, the kluge of the multiple UN organizations with their individual efforts, the global network of programs, the diplomatic corps and media, and finally, the actions of the Situation Center make for a very inefficient mechanism. Redundancy can be a strength but in early warning, controlling the information flow, and linking it to decision and policy makers rapidly and accurately is paramount in order for the Secretary-General to make a difference.

**Prospects and Challenges**

In “Keeping Tabs on a Troubled World”, A. Walter Dorn states “it is hoped that the UN will become better equipped with new resources, financial and technical, as well as with structures for meeting the needs of international security.”

There are hopeful prospects and they focus on early warning enhancements for three major organizations. Recently, the Department of Information Standardization and Assistance (DISA) conducted a study and recommended to DPKO, DHA and UNHCO that each organization purchase and install new computers to modernize administration, management and information collection procedures. DPKO and UNHCO agreed with the recommendations and immediately began making changes while DHA rejected them and did nothing. The two organizations that elected to modernize are about 60% complete but have exhausted their resources to continue upgrades.

There is growing recognition by the United States, Canada and other governments, that information flow is not as efficient as it could be and consideration is
being given to focusing all or some portion of the activities of DKA, DHA and DPKO into the Office of the Secretary-General. At this point it is hard to define what “activities” means, but any change represents a movement in the right direction. Almost any change, improves the process of managing information among the three agencies, strengthens the UN’s competency to manage complex peace operations, and links input to decision makers. The Secretary-General needs access to time sensitive information which gives him better oversight capacities.  

The UN, as well as the Secretary-General, has some internal challenges to resolve before enhancement efforts can continue. In order for an early warning mechanism to work, member states and the General Assembly must support the effort financially. Currently, the decision and acquisition cycles are about 6 to 9 months apart. The 185 member General Assembly may adopt reforms and pass resolutions, but that does not automatically mean funds are approved. The second step is approval of funds, which usually delays purchase of equipment. In practical terms, delays play havoc with system architects. Technology is growing exponentially and costs fluctuate daily. All of which can be frustrating to the planners and operators, making them look bad and hindering enhancements to the mechanisms for early warning.

Building the ability to obtain sound military advice is no easy task. But there is a move to bolster the role of the Military Advisor to the Under Secretary-General for Peace-Keeping Operations. A DPKO substantially strengthened with military staffers provided by Member States, professionalizes the staff, improves the interpretive and
analytical capabilities, and adds competency obtained through experience into the organization. In turn the Secretary-General has a “deeper staff bench.”

UN roles and responsibilities with respect to early warning are shared with other agencies. This arrangement is likely to remain the prevailing pattern for the future. Although the UN is better organized today in providing early warning and the Secretariat is better able to advise the Secretary-General, its in-house procedures are still cumbersome.

**Recommendations**

The UN Secretariat must keep up the momentum of the past two years, in spite of the UN’s financial difficulties. As U.S. Presidential Decision Directive 25 states, “the goal is not to create a global high command but to enable the UN to manage its existing load more effectively.”

Recent efforts to pool information among DPKO, DPA and other relevant departments are likely to result in the availability of a much higher standard of assessed information at the political level, particularly for the Secretary-General and Security Council members. Recent reports, such as “The United Nations in Its Second Half-Century”, by the Independent Working Group on the Future of the United Nations, have placed special emphasis on early warning and the need for better machinery within the UN Secretariat. Given the UN’s current financial situation, the Secretary-General should
be encouraged to cooperate with Member States possessing national capabilities in this area, with a view to helping develop and refine the UN’s early warning capabilities.39

The Secretary-General should continue to refine the early warning capabilities of the Secretariat, concluding additional agreements between the UN and Member States to share information. He should ensure that the early warning capabilities, which already exist within the UN system and related organizations, are effectively pooled.40

A major improvement would be the development of an early warning “alert system”, linked through the contingency planning efforts of the Secretary-General to the Security Council. Getting these triggering mechanism and linkages correct with the DPKO, DHA and DPA is crucial to making an early warning system function properly. The heart of this system could be the Situation Center, which could collate and analyze early warning data and provide an alert service to the Secretary-General. The key function to be performed by the Situation Center, in collaboration with the rest of Secretariat, especially DPKO and DPO, would be to prepare assessments enabling the Secretary-General to act on his authority under Article 99 of the Charter to bring to the attention of the Security Council “any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security.”41

Current early warning systems could be substantially strengthened by working towards an element of “automaticity” in early warning arrangements. Dr. Jessica Tuchman Mathews, of the Council on Foreign Relations, New York, has suggested, “The United Nations should develop an automatic system of responses...The key is that a
certain set of findings would trigger a set of predetermined responses for rapid reaction.”
In such a system, the Security Council would automatically review a potential crisis
situation in close coordination with the Secretary-General. Such events would
simultaneously trigger contingency planning efforts, or at least contingency thinking,
within the Secretariat. Over time, regional organizations could both feed into the system
and also receive information from such a system, allowing them to play a greater political
role. 42

Finally, these measures would have two important and complementary results.
First, they would help reduce the decision making Security Council time during a crisis
by increasing the timeliness and quality of available information. Second, they would
also activate contingency planning efforts at early stages that are indispensable to an
integrated response to crisis on the part of the UN. 43

Conclusion

When the Secretary General of the United Nations calls the General Assembly to
order, the delegates in the chamber, all 185 of them, each have a single vote in the
assembly’s deliberations. They represent nation states ranging in size from China, with
its 1.2 billion people, and Russia, with its 6.5 million square miles of territory stretching
across 11 time zones, to Nauru, with not quite 8,000 people on an island barely 8 miles in
circumference.

Because the only entities officially “visible” to the UN are traditional nation
states, when their delegates announce, with smug modesty, that “all is quiet on the
Western front,” there is no choice but to honor their verdict, unless, of course, there is a system in place that feeds the Secretary-General timely, reliable information to counter those calm announcements.

The UN represents a key international organization that can make a difference in the future of nation-state relations. Efforts to strengthen and centralize management of the incoming flow of information into the UN and Secretariat are positive initiatives toward enhancing the early warning mechanism Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar envisioned in 1987.

An effective early warning mechanism will never stop all international disputes, nor will it always provide the Secretary-General with all the right options to avert regional crisis. But what it will do is enhance the UN’s and ultimately the Secretary’s consultative and information sharing networks, by focusing the flow of information and linking it to decision makers. With timely and accurate information, leaders can make informed decisions which potentially could contribute to averting a regional crisis.
End Notes

1 Secretary-General U Thant in a letter to Ambassador Samar Sen of India, 30 March 1971.
4 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 266.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 267.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 45.
17 Information function means: news releases, public statements or comments.
19 Ibid., 49.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 A review of the 1995 organizational directory for the United Nations does not indicate that the Office for Research and The Collection of Information (ORCI) exists.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 27.
26 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Oliver, George military assistant to the U.S. permanent mission, telephone interview by author, 5 February 1997
32 Ibid.
33 Stiffler, Mark Director of Department of Information and Security (DIS), telephone interview by author, 5 February 1997.
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40 Ibid., 45.
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