



# CANADA'S PERIODICAL ON REFUGEES REFUGE

Volume 15

Number 4

## SPECIAL ISSUE ON EARLY WARNING ON REFUGEE MIGRATION

### Some Thoughts on Early Warning

Susanne Schmeidl

Recent devastating conflicts in Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, Liberia and Somalia remind us that the international community is still struggling with solutions to humanitarian disasters. Despite having vowed, "never again" after Second World War, both Yugoslavia and Rwanda came and went, and other conflicts (like Burundi) keep coming. Can we claim that we were swept away by rapidly unfolding events and therefore unable to do anything? Are we playing the games of children: "I will only try to do something if you do it first," or "I am too small, what can I do?" With respect to Burundi, one might well ask if we will ever learn anything about conflicts and possible ways of intercepting the chain of events that led up to them in order to prevent humanitarian disasters.

This is not to say that we have not thought about issues of conflict resolution or prevention, and the notion of the early warning of conflicts. Many of these ideas have been around both the academic and the non-academic communities for years. In addition, with the rising number of conflicts and the

continuation of humanitarian emergencies in the form of long-standing refugee camps, such ideas have received significant attention since the early 1980s, and have been seriously considered by the United Nations, NGOs and governments since the beginning of the 1990s in particular.

The basic idea is that by predicting humanitarian emergencies, we will be

able to pre-empt, or at least lessen the costs associated with, emergency assistance. To illustrate this fact, let us focus on one humanitarian problem—refugees—and consider what failed conflict prevention costs us. If refugee assistance per refugee costs twenty cents per day (an amount that would probably lead to starvation), multiplied by the current number of sixteen

#### CONTENTS:

<b>Editorial: Some Thoughts on Early Warning</b>	<i>Susanne Schmeidl</i>	.....	1
<b>Issues in Quantitative Modelling in the Early Warning of Refugee Migration</b>	<i>Susanne Schmeidl and J. Craig Jenkins</i>	.....	4
<b>Much Ado About Nothing?</b>	<i>Sharon Ruso</i>	.....	8
<b>Early Warning and Conflict Prevention</b>	<i>Andrew Cottey</i>	.....	11
<b>The Role of International Alert in Advancing Early Warning and Early Action</b>	<i>Kumar Rupesinghe</i>	.....	13
<b>ReliefWeb: Mandates and Objectives</b>	<i>Sharon Ruso</i>	.....	18
<b>Towards the Development of an Early Warning/Response Network</b>	<i>Howard Adelman and Susanne Schmeidl</i>	.....	21
<b>Selected Efforts/Research in the Area of Early Warning</b>	<i>Susanne Schmeidl</i>	.....	28



CANADA'S PERIODICAL ON REFUGEES  
**REFUGE**

Centre for Refugee Studies  
Suite 322, York Lanes  
York University  
4700 Keele Street, North York  
Ontario, Canada M3J 1P3  
Phone: (416) 736-5843  
Fax: (416) 736-5837  
Internet: [refuge@yorku.ca](mailto:refuge@yorku.ca)

Vol. 15 • No. 4  
1996

Editor

C. MICHAEL LANPHIER

Guest Editors

SUSANNE SCHMEIDL

CHAD THOMPSON

Assistant Editors

VICTORIA FOOTE

MARK SWINDER

Managing Editor

ARUL S. ARULIAH

*Refuge* is dedicated to the encouragement of assistance to refugees by providing a forum for sharing information and opinion on Canadian and international issues pertaining to refugees. *Refuge* was founded in 1981.

It is published six times a year by the Centre for Refugee Studies, York University, Canada. *Refuge* is a non-profit, independent periodical supported by private donations and by subscriptions. It is a forum for discussion, and the views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of its funders or staff.

All material in *Refuge* may be reproduced without permission unless copyrighted or otherwise indicated. Credit should be given to the author or source, if named, and *Refuge*. Submissions on related issues are welcome for publication consideration.

Current subscription rates for one year (six issues) are: Canada Can.\$50; all other countries U.S. \$60. (Cheques must be drawn on a Canadian or a U.S. bank.) Current volume single issues are available at \$10 per copy.

Please enclose your purchase order or payment.

ISSN 0229-5113

million refugees (U.S. Committee for Refugees 1996), we would incur a cost of 3.2 million dollars a day which is 22.4 million dollars a week, or over one billion dollars a year. This simple calculation does not include the cost of most bureaucratic apparatuses in Western countries that determine genuine asylum, or the cost of peace keeping, or the cost of rebuilding a country that is totally destroyed and infested by land mines. Furthermore, we have not even addressed the human cost of war and conflict and the immense suffering and irreversible trauma involved. Given these figures, one cannot help but be surprised that we have not already created an early warning system with a set of possible responses to imminent crises.

The above illustration addresses the benefits of having an early warning system in place from an humanitarian and financial perspective. If we were to survey individuals, governments, and (international) organizations, we would likely find agreement that early warning is a desirable exercise. Yet, at the same time, we would probably also receive many 'buts': "But early warning is not as easy as it sounds?" or "But what do we mean exactly by early warning?" or "But how are we supposed to do it?" or "But who would be responsible for such a system?" These questions show that there are many fundamental problems with early warning that still need to be addressed. Employing various perspectives the articles in this special issue of *Refuge* consider the problematic of early warning. The contributions range from critical treatments of early warning (Schmeidl and Jenkins, Rusu, and Cottey) to on-going and proposed efforts to put early warning in place

---

*Dr. Susanne Schmeidl is a postdoctoral fellow and the coordinator of the Prevention/Early Warning Unit at the Centre for Refugee Studies, York University.*

*Chad Thompson is a doctoral student in the department of Social and Political Thought at York University and was a research assistant at the Centre for Refugee Studies, York University.*

(Rupesinghe, Adelman and Schmeidl, Rusu, and the summary of other efforts and research). A common theme that runs through all of these contributions is the attempt to tackle the issue of how early warning could and should be carried out, while considering the barriers we have encountered during past conflicts that have made early warning difficult, if not impossible.

It is worth noting the development of the definition of early warning over the past years. In a way, one can see an evolution of the perception of early warning and how it has become politicized. Initially, early warning was seen as a way to predict a crisis in order to be better prepared for emergency relief, thus focusing on the humanitarian side. Early warning, however, has shifted away from this simple focus on the gathering of information. The articles herein clearly point toward the political side of early warning: the prediction of humanitarian disasters with the purpose of prevention, or at least mitigation, in order to lessen human suffering. For this purpose, early warning efforts focus on analytical forecasting as a tool that is tied into response research and the communication of information to actors who can engage in preventive action.

The focus on response that runs throughout the contributions in this issue demonstrates a sense of responsibility when engaging in early warning. The authors call for a shift away from observation to action, insisting that there is a responsibility to act. There are no innocent observers; how can we innocently observe genocide without condoning it through our inaction? The words of Martin Luther King are fitting: "What frightens me is not oppression by the wicked, [but] ... the indifference of the good" (quoted in PIOOM 1995). Also relevant are the words of Pastor Niemöller, victim of the Nazis, reflecting on the manner in which we deny responsibility for human misery as long as we believe it does not affect us:

First they came for the Jews  
and I did not speak out—  
because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for the communists  
and I did not speak out—  
because I was not a communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists  
and I did not speak out—  
because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for me—  
and there was no one left  
to speak out for me.

Early warning of humanitarian crises is inherently linked to the necessity of acting to prevent atrocities. Early warning research does not seek to collect information on impending crises for the simple end of obtaining knowledge, but for the sake of using such knowledge to avert catastrophe.

Early warning, then, is an eminently sensible activity on political, economic, and moral grounds. One might wonder what more there is to be said on the matter. If we can all agree that this is a crucial activity, why are we continually caught by surprise by each new humanitarian disaster? And when we do foresee such a disaster coming, why are we so woefully unable to respond? The articles contained within illustrate both the difficulties of establishing reliable early warning and response systems, as well as the progress underway to overcome these difficulties. Each article provides a different focus on early warning, and therefore contributes to the ongoing debate on the subject.

The first set of articles addresses the difficulties in the process of warning itself, and in identifying high-risk situations, as well as the thorny question of what is to be done once such situations are recognized. The first article, by Schmeidl and Jenkins, examines the problem of quantitative modeling in early warning analysis by considering the utility of indicator and large-scale quantitative analysis. The authors, while themselves involved in quantitative prediction of refugee migration, examine the limits of such an approach and the problems that need to be addressed for the purpose of using indicator models as a meaningful forecasting device. The following two papers address the difficulties in translating such information into action.

Rusu scrutinizes the 'Early Warning debate,' raising definitional issues (what is early warning?) as well as political issues (who are the actors?). Rusu's article surveys existing efforts on early warning from a critical perspective and raises many questions concerning the institutional obstacles that still need to be addressed before we can arrive at a working early warning mechanism for the purpose of conflict prevention. Cottey's paper follows a similar bent, assessing the nature and functioning, as well as the actors, of early warning, and the shortcomings of the current process. Despite their cautionary tone however, the authors are guardedly optimistic about the involvement and responsibility of certain state actors in early warning. Guarded optimism, in fact, characterizes all the contributions. Early warning is confronted by many problems, but they need not be insurmountable.

The next set of papers provides us with descriptions of on-going, and proposed, efforts on early warning. These papers present a sampling of the different approaches to establishing reliable early warning systems, from an NGO, United Nations and academic perspective respectively. In the first piece, Rupesinghe introduces the efforts of International Alert, a British NGO. This article focuses on the utilization of NGOs for the purpose of early warning. The second paper provides a description of one of the two main efforts on early warning within the UN system, ReliefWeb, established by the UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs. (The other UN effort—Humanitarian Early Warning System—is included in the "Selected efforts on Early Warning" compilation at the end of this issue.) ReliefWeb parallels the effort of International Alert to some extent, concentrating on the utilization of UN agencies in coordinating responses to complex humanitarian emergencies. The final paper in this set is a proposal by the Centre for Refugee Studies on an academic-NGO consortium for the purpose of collecting, analyzing, and communicating early

warning information. This proposal argues for an incorporation of previous efforts (including those presented here) into an early warning network that uses the Internet for the dissemination of information. While each of these three efforts focuses on a different group of actors, all share the conviction that it is both possible and essential to move from recognizing to averting humanitarian disasters.

This special issue on early warning presented here provides only a glimpse; many other opinions and efforts exist, which, unfortunately, could not be included in this issue. For those who wish to pursue the matter of early warning, there is a descriptive listing of various other projects, along with brief accounts of their research and efforts. It was compiled from responses to a query sent out on the Internet asking 'who is doing what' in the area of early warning. Those involved in early warning efforts who do not use the Internet are therefore absent in this summary. Nevertheless, this compilation is part of an effort at the Centre for Refugee Studies, in collaboration with International Alert, to create a directory on early warning. So please contact us concerning any efforts that were excluded. In addition, due to space limitations, we have only presented those responses that focus on larger systematic research and efforts; we would be grateful, however, if individual researchers as well would contact us about their work for inclusion in the directory.

The questions raised here concerning early warning are not completely answered; the issue of early warning is still "a work in progress." We welcome your participation in the on-going discussion around early warning. ■

## References

- PIOOM (Interdisciplinary Research Program on Root Causes of Human Rights Violations), Leiden University, Netherlands. 1995. *Newsletter and Progress Report*. Editor: Alex Schmid. Vol. 7, No. 1
- U.S. Committee for Refugees. 1996. *World Refugee Survey 1996*. Washington, D.C.: Immigration and Refugee Services of America. □