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Some Thoughts on Early Warning

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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 too 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

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