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COMMENTS ABOUT RESPONDING TO EARLY WARNINGS

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Certainly it is important to get early warning that a conflict is escalating and leading to widespread destruction, violence, and death. If partisans in the struggle or those outside of it anticipated how bad a conflict would become, appropriate action could be taken. This is the conventional thinking about the value of early warning.

Appropriate action might include measures which limit, stop, or roll back the escalation of the conflict. Action might also be taken to care for those who are hurt and endangered by the deterioration of the struggle. Early warning would give parties wishing to inhibit the conflict's escalation or to minimize the harm caused by the conflict the time to mobilize support and take actions which would achieve those goals.

Related to these expectations is the importance of having warnings which are sufficiently early and which are viewed as credible. There are dilemmas here. Warnings which convincingly forecast terrible events are likely to convey the presumption that great forces are producing those events. Successfully interrupting them therefore seems unlikely and hence taking action to avert disaster would appear likely to fail. On the other hand, if the arguments for deteriorating conditions are not overwhelming, taking action to prevent the terrible developments is likely to be seen as unnecessary. After all, there are costs in trying and failing to prevent bad things from happening. But even acting effectively to prevent destructive deterioration of a

conflict may be costly; great effort is expended but is not likely to be acknowledged because its contribution to something not happening is unrecognized and those who did well receive little or no credit.

TAKING EARLY ACTION

Whether or not effective action will be taken to prevent, limit, or repair destructive developments, then, depends on more than having early warnings, even credible ones. Effective efforts depend on the availability of parties who wish and are able to carry out appropriate action, and parties who correctly believe that their actions would indeed be effective.

A great variety of parties can contribute to the mitigation of a conflict's destructiveness. They include national and international governmental and nongovernmental organizations, acting as intermediaries to ameliorate the conflict and its consequences. International governmental organizations include not only the UN, but also the specialized agencies of the United Nations, such as UNICEF. Regional organizations have also sometimes been effective intervenors. National governments, sometimes from the region, can also act to mediate or otherwise help limit a destructive conflict.

International nongovernmental organizations are playing increasingly important roles in mitigating destructive conflicts. These include humanitarian aid organizations, church-related organizations offering mediating services, and organizations fostering and advancing human and civil rights. Organizations which are not directly engaged in conflict settlement efforts can also be of indirect assistance, this includes news organizations and multinational corporations.

The parties to the conflict also encompass groups and organizations which may act to mitigate their conflict's destructiveness. They may include factions within the government,

opposition political parties, peace movement organizations, women's organizations, and business associations. The roles of such actors in taking ameliorative action is often inadequately recognized.

Who might take action to limit a conflict or to de-escalate it greatly affects what information is relevant and what action can be taken. For example, the problem of mobilizing support to take ameliorative action differs greatly among potential actors and for various kinds of actions. To illustrate, nongovernmental organizations which provide humanitarian aid have a constituency to provide emergency aid; their leaders generally need a visible disaster to mobilize the support required to raise the funds to help mitigate some consequences of a conflict. Governmental leaders may have more ability to mobilize support, but only a small ready-made constituency to support peacemaking intervention.

What is a serious conflict is not inherent in the conflict, the recognition of a conflict as serious is a social construction. People in different relationships to the conflict are likely to disagree about the seriousness of a conflict. Some interpretations become salient as people with different authority and relations to the conflict parties strive to make their views prevail.

Different kinds of actors can take different kinds of actions to mitigate a conflict's destructiveness. It is important to know and expand the variety of possible actions. If the repertoire for each actor were enlarged, and there were widespread familiarity with those possible conflict-mitigating strategies and tactics, effective early action would be more likely to be undertaken.

POSSIBLE ACTIONS

What actions might be effectively taken to limit the destructiveness of conflicts should be considered in terms of the stage of escalation the conflict has reached and of varying time

perspectives. I will discuss possible mitigating actions which can be taken when a conflict has escalated into an intense confrontation, and before a major conflict has emerged.

Averting a Crisis and Escalation

Usually, attention is given to a conflict when a crisis erupts or appears imminent. The usual method of trying to limit a conflict's escalation is to try to deter the actor who is seen as threatening escalation. Such deterrence may be attempted by the threatened party or by outside governments or international organizations.

A frequent form this takes is to issue warnings, either by making viewing-with-alarm statements or more formal threats of sanctions if certain escalating conduct is taken. Deterrence may also include the mobilization of military forces by a threatened party or by allies or possible intervenors. (This may have been effective prior to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1991.) A higher level of deterrence may be to dispatch military forces to a threatened area. The problem here is to make the threats credible without themselves becoming part of an escalating dynamic. The dispatch of international peacekeeping forces, as was recently done in the Macedonian republic of the former Yugoslavia, is less likely than national forces to contribute to an escalatory spiral.

Deterrence may also be waged by threatened parties in non-military, and non-provocative forms. This may entail preparing for civilian-based resistance and by popular demonstrations of solidarity with the threatened people or government. Local and non-governmental action can also include giving publicity and drawing mass media attention to the threats of escalation. Outside agencies and international organizations may send fact-finding missions and give widespread publicity to their conclusions.

In addition to efforts to deter the eruption of violence or the escalation of a conflict by

coercive threats, conciliatory moves may be de-escalating. Here the danger is that appeasement may whet an aggressor's appetite or simply reward the aggressor. If conducted from a strong political and moral ground, and combined with appropriate possible coercion, conciliatory efforts can be effective in mitigating the destructive effects of a conflict.

National governments not directly engaged in the conflict or international governmental and nongovernmental organizations may offer to undertake mediating missions. This can vary from informal information gathering and transmission to more formal mediation-facilitated conferences.

Once a conflict has escalated to the point of large-scale violence, de-escalation efforts are handicapped. Too often, either a bloody imposition or stalemate precedes a settlement. Nevertheless, some de-escalating efforts by factions within one of the contending parties or by outside organizations can hasten a settlement. External economic sanctions and arms embargoes can be helpful; under certain circumstances, external intervention in the form of overflights by military aircraft or of armed peacekeeping forces can also be useful.

Local and international non-governmental actors also can contribute to de-escalating movement by developing channels of communication, developing new options, and trying out confidence-building measures across lines of conflict. This may occur in the context of interactive conflict resolution workshops. International governmental and non-governmental organizations can also provide observers and monitors to provide protection for public discussions and elections.

Intervention to provide humanitarian aid has become an important method to mitigate some of the disastrous consequences of conflict. The provision of such aid might more frequently be used to foster de-escalation by involving combatants in mutual assistance and in

cooperation to provide humanitarian aid to victims from all sides.

Finally, incremental forceful interventions by international and regional organizations should sometimes be implemented. This may include small-scale military actions such as disarming small groups of combatants and large-scale actions to forcefully separate contending forces.

Preventing Conflict Escalation

Prevention of conflict emergence and escalation requires a long time perspective. It would be helpful to develop well-grounded information about what has worked and under what conditions. The findings of such work should be given wide publicity.

An important step in preventing conflict is the development of institutionalized means to express and manage conflicts. One of the great achievements of democratic structures and processes is that they provide the means to peacefully adjust to changes which otherwise might be brought about by violent means. More specific and limited structures and processes can also play a role in preventing conflict escalation. For example, this includes establishing conciliation services, for ethnic, communal, environmental, or industrial conflicts. These can be organized at the community, national, regional, and global levels. In addition, training in conflict resolution methods, the formation of dialogue groups and institutions across lines of conflict provide means to interrupt an emerging conflict before escalation has gone very far.

More fundamentally, conflict prevention must deal with the underlying sources of conflicts within and among societies. This means redressing grievous cases of inequity, developing structures which provide protection against severe repression and oppression, and sharing an understanding of how the past and present are viewed by others.

These matters are of particular concern in periods of rapid change, when the balance of

power and expectations within or among societies are shifting. At such times, special attention by those most directly involved and by those external to the changes should foster long run solutions and means of adjustment.

CONCLUSIONS

Once a conflict has escalated into ongoing, large-scale violence, massive interference may be required or a long wait while some parties in the conflict are beaten into submission or all into bloody stalemate. Therefore, early rather than late intervention to slow down or stop escalation or to move toward de-escalation or settlement is much to be preferred.

I have tried to suggest that such early intervention requires not only early warning, but a sense that effective action can be taken and without too much loss to the would-be intervenor. Confidence in the possibilities of early intervention requires leaders and constituencies knowing about successes as well as failures of such intervention.

We must understand better what measures are effective. We must also understand better why the disasters of some conflicts are viewed as serious enough to arouse action while others are little noted or noted with regret, but inaction.