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Informal Interactive Dialogue on Early Warning, Assessment, and
the Responsibility to Protect
United Nations General Assembly
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Madame Acting President,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Many thanks go to the President of the General Assembly for convening this informal interactive dialogue on early warning, assessment, and the responsibility to protect (RtoP) and to you, Madame Acting President, for so energetically and skillfully chairing it. I have no doubt that our conversation today will underscore the value of the continuing consideration of RtoP by the General Assembly. We have listened carefully to all Member States in the process of developing the conceptual, political, and institutional dimensions of RtoP, and we have learned from you. We look forward to our continuing conversation.

My core message today is simple: we should avoid an overly mechanical, simplistic, or sequenced approach to early warning, assessment, and action. Early warning should not be the beginning of the UN's engagement in a situation of concern. We should not wait for the bad news, when options are limited and unattractive and the human toll is rising, before crafting a systemwide response. As you will recall, the Secretary-General has called for "an early and flexible response, tailored to the circumstances of each case." That requires early engagement and early understanding.

Early Engagement

The key to effective policy is early engagement for preventive purposes and hence early understanding of the situation on the ground. Pillars One and Two of the Secretary-General's strategy stress the value of early, sustained, and constructive involvement by the international community. Likewise, in paragraph 139 of the Outcome Document from the 2005 World Summit, the heads of state

and government declared that “we also intend to commit ourselves, as necessary and appropriate, to helping States build capacity to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity and to assisting those which are under stress before crises and conflicts break out.” Clearly such a commitment entails early engagement and early understanding, a point underscored in the Secretary-General’s recent report (A/64/864, para. 4).

Moreover, early and constructive international engagement may make early warning unnecessary. The first goal, as the Outcome Document underlined, should be prevention, prevention, prevention. In this regard, quiet but sustained work on training, education, and advocacy, as Francis Deng’s office on genocide prevention has been undertaking, can be very helpful over the long run. The second pillar of the Secretary-General’s strategy, with its emphasis on capacity building and assistance, envisions an early and ongoing engagement with states as a preventive measure. Such activities highlight the importance of the UN system “acting as one,” as the Secretary-General has just underscored.

Assessment

High quality assessment is needed for prevention and capacity building, as well as for “timely and decisive” response, as called for in paragraph 139 of the Outcome Document. In such sensitive and consequential matters, it is essential that we “get it right” in terms of a calibrated, measured, and differentiated response based on a full and balanced understanding of the situation at hand when prevention fails. We need a sober consideration of the implications of our policy choices, as well as a keen appreciation of the limitations of external action and the unlikelihood of quick fixes to deeply embedded problems. Our goal should be early understanding, not just early warning. We need to understand why certain things are happening, not just what is happening.

In producing broad-based assessments, the analysis and views provided by partners can be an important asset. Such supplementary assessments could come from regional and sub-regional organizations, transnational civil society, or independent experts. The voices of the national government, parliamentarians,

civil society, and neighboring countries can provide valuable local knowledge. We should seek redundancy in sources of information so as to provide corroboration of the facts on the ground. We should avoid sweeping conclusions and knee-jerk reactions to headlines, as these are not sound bases for policy.

We need, as well, a dynamic assessment/reassessment process, not a one-time event or static measurement. In terms of gauging the likelihood of RtoP crimes and violations, the rates and direction of change in key indicators are critical. We need a moving picture, not a snapshot. RtoP situations have multiple dimensions, so we cannot focus on a single factor or event. Assessment entails understanding the mosaic not the pieces, the pattern not a single act.

To the extent possible, we also will pursue joint assessments across the UN system, both of the ailment and of the best course of treatment in particular cases. This underscores the importance of the new convening authority described in paragraph 18 of the Secretary-General's recent report (A/64/864). Though it is intended to address emergency situations, not their prevention, the larger patterns of systemwide cooperation the new process is meant to reflect and encourage could be equally useful to assessments of possible prevention strategies.

I'd like to make one final point on assessment before turning to early warning. As you are no doubt more acutely aware than I am, capacities for gathering and assessing information are distributed markedly unevenly among Member States. That fact underscores the importance of having reliable, timely, credible, and authoritative assessments from the United Nations. When inter-governmental bodies face tough decisions, they particularly value the impartial assessments of the Secretariat, as a source of judgment above the interests of particular Member States or groups.

Early Warning

Let us be clear: early warning is not an end in itself. Early warning without early and effective action would only serve to reinforce stereotypes of UN fecklessness, of its penchant for words over deeds. The Secretary-General's RtoP

strategy seeks to overcome that prevalent perception. Paragraph 139 of the Outcome Document called for “timely and decisive” collective action when peaceful means prove inadequate and national authorities are manifestly failing to protect their populations from RtoP crimes and violations. Surely that requires reliable early warning, as called for in paragraph 138.

Early and effective action, however, need not be dramatic, loud, or robust. Early warning tells us we need to act. It does not necessarily tell us how best to act. That is where an astute assessment of policy options comes into play.

Early warning should lead to:

- 1) more focused policy attention at the highest levels of the UN, in terms of both the Secretariat and inter-governmental organs;
- 2) a searching and candid assessment of what is needed and of how the international community can be helpful;
- 3) a sober weighing of policy tools and options; and
- 4) the timely authorization of appropriate actions and measures by the proper political authorities and bodies under the UN Charter.

Challenges

All of this is easier said than done. There is an inherent tension in this work between raising false alarms (and hence eroding credibility and access) and the abiding fear of missing the one case that later explodes. It is a lot easier to recognize elevated risks than to know precisely when and how things will escalate into mass violence in specific situations.

Understanding the problem in a given case, moreover, does not guarantee that there is a satisfactory answer. Nor does it offer assurance that the UN has the tools to do the job, even if the will can be forged. Moreover, the UN and the world at large are still learning about the causes of such heinous crimes and about how to help states and civil society to prevent them. Our capacity – even with the increments proposed by the Secretary-General – will never match the scope of

the task. So modesty is in order. One thing is absolutely clear, however: only through a common and concerted effort will the Member States and the Secretariat, with their civil society and regional partners, begin to curb these affronts to human dignity.