



## Administrative Committee on Coordination

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### CONSULTATIONS ON EARLY WARNING OF NEW FLOWS OF REFUGEES AND DISPLACED PERSONS

#### REPORT OF THE AD HOC WORKING GROUP

#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The present report is intended to provide a first-hand critical account of the Consultations on Early Warning of New Flows of Refugees and Displaced Persons in procedural and substantive terms at the threshold of the third year of inter-agency early warning action, hopefully broadened and strengthened. The participants in these periodic Consultations are unanimous in suggesting that the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) approve the continued functioning of these meetings and with the mandate to cover the great majority of aspects of humanitarian early warning. The Ad Hoc Working Group on the Early Warning of New Flows of Refugees and Displaced Persons sees a scope for the further development of the amount and timeliness of relevant accurate information and to maximize the policy impact of its early warning reports and recommendations.

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## I. BACKGROUND

1. The Consultations on Early Warning of New Flows of Refugees and Displaced Persons were started in 1993, following the decision of October 1992 of the Organizational Committee of the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) to endorse the recommendation of the ACC Ad Hoc Working Group on the same subject. The Consultations are organized and chaired by the Department of Humanitarian Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat. The following agencies and offices are the regular members of the inter-agency meetings: the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Food Programme (WFP), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) (observer), the Centre for Human Rights of the United Nations Secretariat, the Department of Political Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, and the Department of Humanitarian Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat. By the end of 1994, 12 Consultations had been conducted in the first two years of this activity, in which substantial progress has been achieved.

## II. THE FIRST TWO YEARS

2. In order to give the subsequent description and evaluation concrete meaning, the key elements of the ACC decision of 1992 shall be briefly recalled. Two important humanitarian functions of early warning of movements of refugees and displaced persons were stipulated. The first was to help promote actions that could alleviate the possible causes of flight and hopefully prevent them. The second function was to help ensure that adequate and timely relief assistance was provided, should a new flow of refugees or displaced persons take place. An effective early warning capability must therefore include more than just the collecting of information about possible causes of displacement and the offering of projections about how, when and on what scale such displacement might occur: it must also be integrally linked to mechanisms and individuals with the mandate and willingness to take action quickly and appropriately.

3. A major constraint emphasized in the 1992 report leading to the start of the Consultations on Early Warning was the still underdeveloped technical expertise for collecting, processing and analysing early warning information. This weakness encompassed unresolved questions regarding the application of data-processing and communications technology to the management of information flows of the early warning mechanism that was to be set up.

4. The record of the experimental first two years of the Consultations portrays the determination of the participants to implement to the best of their capability the mandate given by ACC, despite the technical limitations imposed on the exercise.

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5. While the original concept envisaged monthly meetings, the practice so far has been to convene the Consultations every six to eight weeks. After each meeting, a brief report is prepared and, with the consent of all participants, transmitted to the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and the executive heads of the other agencies and offices represented at the Consultations. During the first year, clearance was obtained from the Senior Management of the Department of Humanitarian Affairs before the report was distributed among the other partners. Recently the Ad Hoc Working Group has begun, after finalizing its reports, to send them out immediately to all executive heads including to the Executive Office of the Secretary-General of the United Nations Secretariat.

6. From the beginning, the reports have presented a short list of cases selected, after careful analysis, by the Ad Hoc Working Group, as constituting urgent situations that might give rise to new flows, and have called for specific measures to be taken by the Secretary-General or other high officials either to help avert the crisis or to facilitate measures to mitigate the impact of the eventual emergency. More recently, the Ad Hoc Working Group has classified the cases in terms of both the timing of the expected displacement crisis and the estimated size of the displacement.

7. Under the terms of the initial mandate, every participant was expected to bring analyses-related information to the periodic meetings in order to enable the Ad Hoc Working Group as a whole to understand as comprehensively as possible each situation in its complexity and to arrive at a clear-cut but carefully considered conclusion as to whether measures for a particular situation should be issued. The Group has greatly benefited from the high-quality assessment notes provided by FAO/the Global Information and Early Warning System for Food and Agriculture (GIEWS), from the well-documented submissions of UNHCR and from the brief notes of the Department of Humanitarian Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, and the Centre for Human Rights of the United Nations Secretariat. Verbal presentations have also been given by other members of the Ad Hoc Working Group. It is the general view that substantially more should be done by the Department of Humanitarian Affairs and the other participants to augment and improve the information load for these meetings.

8. The experience of the first 12 Consultations has demonstrated the importance of the periodic gatherings. Thus, while the supporting material frequently left much to be desired, the dialogue, as structured and focused, has helped to further the conceptualization of the early warning task and to sharpen the analysts' eye for the mix of symptoms and factors warranting the urgent signalling expected of the Ad Hoc Working Group. Assuming that the meetings continue (attended by the same experts representing their respective organizations), it can be safely predicted that the ability of the Ad Hoc Working Group as a whole and of its individual members to meet the challenge of professional early warning based on rich experience is bound to grow in the future. This projection is based on the momentum and interaction that have characterized the functioning of the Ad Hoc Working Group, especially during its second year.

9. The effectiveness of the Ad Hoc Working Group's access to the executive level has, regrettably, remained a serious concern of every participant. While

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the reports of the Consultations on Early Warning reach the offices of executive heads, there is uncertainty as to whether the message contained in these brief alerts is received and acted upon. Everybody is aware of the information-overload problem of senior managers and of the self-evident need of senior officials to attend to the pressing issues of the moment. Still, if the costs in human lives and resources of today's megacrises are to be lowered markedly, the current neglect of early warnings for preventive purposes must be reversed. The Consultation Group has recently begun to develop new approaches to reaching senior management. It will soon be known whether these changes in signalling will have the desired effect and lead to concrete executive action for the purposes of prevention and mitigation.

### III. METHODOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS

10. As mentioned above, the original debate about the establishment of an early warning mechanism had been revolving extensively around the issue of computer-assisted information by the time the ACC Ad Hoc Working Group decided, in summer 1992, to set aside for the time being the question of full compatibility in terms of the various systems of hardware and software used by the participating agencies and offices. The members of the Consultation Group agreed to postpone this matter, so as not to delay the commencement of the Group's work.

11. It should be pointed out that the application of computer technology has suffered some delay in several organizations in the United Nations system. The Department of Humanitarian Affairs itself has only just begun to implement the Humanitarian Early Warning Systems (HEWS) database project, and it will take some time before the system is fully operational. FAO is most advanced in the development of information and analysis systems. UNHCR has recently made great strides forward leading to quality data and analysis that invite emulation by some of its partners in the early warning community.

12. While further progress in the technological sphere is certain, its timing depends on the availability of resources and qualified personnel. In the meantime, the representatives in the Consultations have started to focus on the identification and adoption of common indicators for enforced displacement. In a pragmatic agreement, the Ad Hoc Working Group has decided that every agency or office should contribute a small number of core indicators reflecting their particular expertise. These short lists would enable the Ad Hoc Working Group as a whole to arrive at a consolidated list of indicators marking the areas of concern for the mass flow problem.

13. It is self-evident that the methodological and technological concerns of the past could not be dropped from the agenda of the Consultations on Early Warning. In a world that is still undergoing a communications revolution, the recent pace of technological innovations will not slow down in the foreseeable future. If the Department of Humanitarian Affairs and other partners accomplish their programme targets in information management, data processing and data analysis, the Ad Hoc Working Group will resume the discussion about integrating and consolidating the individual components of this early warning exercise and search either for uniformity or at least for full-fledged compatibility of the

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approaches. At this point, it is impossible to pinpoint the date when this level of close collaboration will be reached.

14. Continued computerization and strengthened data gathering and analysis will necessarily result in additional budgetary requirements. In this connection, the Group wishes to recall the remark appearing in the ACC Ad Hoc Working Group report of 1992 that an effective early warning effort by participating agencies and offices would require additional personnel and financial resources. Nevertheless, some organizations have expressed willingness to absorb extra costs within their respective overall budgets.

#### IV. FUTURE OF THE CONSULTATIONS ON EARLY WARNING

15. Since the consideration and implementation of refugee-related Consultations on Early Warning in 1992, much has changed in the humanitarian sector of the United Nations system. The humanitarian partners have collaborated closely in the newly created Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and improved the coordination among themselves. The initial focus of mass flows of refugees and displaced persons has not lost any of its relevance. The rapidly escalating number of complex emergencies had led to a logical conclusion - regarding the need to increase efforts in systematic and comprehensive early warning and prevention. Since IASC has formally stated its responsibility for, and interest in, early warning activities and since mass flows are seen as being intimately linked to other aspects of evolving humanitarian crises, it was agreed to recommend that the ACC Ad Hoc Working Group should submit its report to IASC and the IASC Working Group, thereby also opening up a greater prospect for the consideration of its findings. The Ad Hoc Working Group would still recommend that it report to ACC, but via IASC. It was therefore agreed to recommend that the Ad Hoc Working Group's meetings should take place so as to coincide with the preparation of papers for the IASC Working Group.

16. The increasing amount of relevant information allows a better assessment of the incoming signals. It should become a top priority of the proposed Humanitarian Early Warning network to procure access to, and integrate, additional information flows and thus increase the usefulness of the United Nations consultative mechanism. Reference should be made to the rich field of documentation, generated within UNDP and a variety of long-standing non-governmental organizations' data systems and academic institutions. It was concluded, after considerable discussion by the Ad Hoc Working Group, to continue the focus of the Ad Hoc Working Group's discussion on the mass flows of refugees and internally displaced persons (especially as a large majority of emergencies involve movement of population).

17. Another matter also warrants much more attention, namely the attendance of guests and observers at the meetings. Although the Ad Hoc Working Group issued an open invitation to any party with an interest in humanitarian early warning, among them other humanitarian agencies and figures, especially non-governmental organizations, academic specialists and government representatives, the record so far has shown minimal attendance by other than the regular members. It was recommended that membership should be consistent and not ad hoc, and that non-governmental organizations and relevant research institutions should be

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invited to become members, the key membership criterion being the capacity to add significant value to early warning on mass flows.

18. During the first two years, the reports of the Consultations on Early Warning have been distributed only among the executive heads of the core members. Rarely have the brief reports reached other addresses. After careful consideration by the members of the Ad Hoc Working Group, it was suggested that distribution should be handled as flexibly as possible, with the hope that the reports might become widely available. All interested United Nations partners, many non-governmental organizations, operational as well as of an advocacy type, academic institutions, research centres, States Members of the United Nations, and the media should have access to this information and will be requested to send their feedback regarding specific countries and/or areas. It is recommended that the Ad Hoc Working Group, with the agreement of ACC and IASC, establish a revised process for issuing and distributing the periodic reports in this broad fashion.

19. The Ad Hoc Working Group would consider an expanded mandate once it had developed the capacity to assume it, thereby covering the full range of humanitarian early warning subsuming the mass displacement problem. This would also help avoid duplication and overlaps in the area of humanitarian early warning.

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