Faith-Based Conflict Early Warning: Experiences from Two Conflict Zones

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Formal interfaith associations are an emerging frontline of conflict early warning and early response systems. While early warning systems and peace negotiators at the national level may be successful in addressing structural issues and war, the article points to a need to build more localized or "organic" intrafaith and interfaith mechanisms that can be mobilized to prevent violence at the source. Faith-based early warning systems can be a valuable tool for identifying early signs of violence and for controlling in-group members in order to quell religious and ethnic violence in deeply divided societies. The examples of cases from Sri Lanka and Nigeria demonstrate the usefulness of sustaining local or community-based early warning and early response mechanisms, and the merits of building on new or existing community associations, particularly faith-based associations for early warning and early response. The study is based on the author's own experience directing a community-based conflict early warning system in Sri Lanka from 2002 to 2006 and designing a similar system for Nigeria in 2013.

Keywords: conflict early warning, early warning systems, religious violence, interfaith dialogue, intrafaith dialogue, religious peacebuilding, violence prevention, violence interruption, Nigeria, Sri Lanka

Riots broke out in the town of Mutur1 in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka in June 2002, after fourteen crosses erected by a nearby Christian church were destroyed by Muslims.2 A cadre belonging to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), popularly known as the Tamil Tigers, assaulted a Muslim man driving a taxi and the Muslims retaliated by attacking an LTTE office to which the LTTE responded with a hartal.3 Muslims, led by the North East Muslim Brotherhood and Muslim Students Union at the South Eastern University, responded by imposing a counter-hartal, provoking ethnic clashes, burning of houses, and damage to places of religious worship.

> The security forces eventually quelled these incidents. . . . However, modern communications are such that news and rumors surrounding the incident quickly spread to other towns. Vallachenai[4] experienced the worst violence. Terror, fear and violence gripped the town for a few days. Fear and insecurity spread to other towns such as Batticaloa, Kathankudy, Kalmunai, and Akkraipattu. Over 12 people died during this incident with more than a hundred injured and over 235 shops belonging to both communities were destroyed. As a result, an unofficial curfew was imposed for a few days.[5]

[1] A town in the District of Trincomalee that is majority Muslim and is situated in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka; the adjacent villages are Tamil.
[2] Kumar Rupesinghe, "Enhancing Human Security in the Eastern Province: Road Map Discussion Paper No. 4." Paper presented at the Road Map Program on Negotiating a Political Settlement and Promoting Conflict Transformation in Sri Lanka workshop, Colombo, Sri Lanka, October 16, 2002.
[3] A *hartal* is a protest that involves the stoppage of work.
[4] A town in the District of Batticaloa in the Eastern Province that is majority Muslim.
[5] Rupesinghe, "Enhancing Human Security in the Eastern Province."

The violent events described above were so serious that they reverberated around Sri Lanka and threatened to derail the fragile ceasefire agreement signed between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE in 2001. A noteworthy cause of this violence was the role of religious symbols. Religious conflict or mass religious violence was unusual for Sri Lanka where the civil war was widely categorized as an ethnic conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese. However, the conflict always had religious undertones.

The violence in Mutur, which started as religious violence between Christians and Muslims, underlined the powerful force of religious symbols in violent interethnic or interfaith conflict. The religious symbolism also had a direct impact on nonreligious/secular issues such as the peace process and the ceasefire agreement between the ethnic Tamils and the ethnic Sinhalese. It had a bearing on all communities irrespective of faith. The Mutur incident is a reminder that the spillover effect of communal violence can turn into religious violence and vice versa, and threaten all-out war affecting religious and ethnic communities alike.

The same is true for the Interfaith Mediation Centre in Kaduna, Nigeria. In Nigeria, home to numerous ethnic groups, the predominant lines of separation or "segregation" are based on faith, perhaps even more so than in eastern Sri Lanka. Therefore, in both instances, faith-based approaches to early warning and violence prevention were crucial to sustainable peace.

The Need for Conflict Early Warning

The violence in Mutur and Valachenai underscored the need to systematically collect, analyze, and respond to all early warning signs. In Sri Lanka, the Foundation for Co-Existence (FCE) was established.[6] For the FCE, early warning meant, quite simply, to obtain accurate information from the grass-roots or community level about an impending or unravelling violent incident and to communicate that information at the right time to the appropriate persons in a format that would have the most impact.[7]

However, the interspersing of mono-ethnic/mono-religious cities, towns, and villages, particularly in the Eastern Province, added to the complexity of community-based early warning. During tense situations, as with the Mutur incident, violence would be triggered along the borders of these mono-ethnic/mono-religious settlements and could spread to other cities, towns, and villages in other districts within the province.

The need for violence prevention was particularly pertinent to the FCE early warning system. As experts have pointed out, "unless the early warning system has a mechanism to mitigate

[6] The FCE conflict early warning system used events data and a complex network of violence interrupters to reduce violence. During this time, FCE managed to prevent around one hundred incidents of violence, including potentially deadly riots. An independent evaluation of this work in *The Technology of Nonviolence: Social Media and Violence Prevention* by Joseph G. Bock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012) identified a 26% reduction in the lethality of violence as a result of this system.

[7] In its application to Northern Nigeria as part of the work of the Interfaith Mediation Centre in Kaduna, we were able to slightly modify the FCE early warning slogan to "Right information; provided at the Right time; to the Right people; in the Right format; for the Right action." This became known as the "Five R's" of early warning.

the conflict, there is little utility to be gained in refining the accuracy of current models."[8] The dissemination of early warnings alone will not quell tensions and conflict. "In other words, the sources of conflict, the perpetrators of violence, and their potential victims (i.e., citizens) have to be addressed and involved in peacemaking efforts. Without communication and the partnering of external and internal capacities, an early warning system is of little consequence."[9]

The FCE community-based early warning system, with a strong emphasis on early intervention, was a unique symbiosis of an information center, an early response unit, and a group of highly motivated field staff who were local community leaders, including religious leaders, youth leaders, members of women's organizations, farmers, journalists, local politicians, and other community groups and members. The reliance on "locals" was critical for FCE since it empowered local communities to participate and to lead the peacebuilding effort. As experts have pointed out, local experts are "best positioned in terms of local knowledge and tactical options to react to warnings immediately" and in many instances of catastrophe, the earliest sources of relief come from the endangered population itself, which includes faith-based organizations.[10]

The uniqueness of the FCE community-based early warning system was its early response capabilities. Overtime, through formalized response mechanisms, particularly with interfaith religious coexistence committees, FCE gained considerable access to accurate information and an ability to catalyze the mobilization of interventions using local religious leadership, and scripture in particular. These members of the religious coexistence committee formed a critical mass, or, as Joseph Bock calls it, "bounded crowdfeeding, which involves sending information back to trust network members and trustworthy local-, mid-, and top-level leaders at locations that have been flagged as likely to become violent."[11]

Formal Interfaith Associations

The Foundation for Co-Existence felt the need to develop this "critical mass" of community members very early on. The reason was to tap into local knowledge—and by local, we meant community knowledge. We realized very early on that community members were better at identifying precipitating conditions for ethnic riots, a phenomenon so common to the Eastern Province.[12] They were also capable of early action, whether that was moving out of the community to get away from harm or taking direct action to prevent it. This was particularly true with regard to cyclical forms of violence such as riots, which caused significant loss to life and threatened to unsettle the ceasefire agreement between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE.[13]

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[8] Alexander Austin, "Early Warning and the Field: A Cargo Cult Science?," in *Transforming Ethnopolitical Conflict*, ed. Alex Austin, Martina Fischer, and Norbert Ropers (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2004), 129–50.
[9] "Preventing Future Wars," *Peace Matters* (Winter, 1998), http://www.ppu.org.uk/peacematters/peacematters/1999/pm_9899_futurwars.html.
[10] Casey Barrs, "Conflict Early Warning: Warning Who?" *The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*, February 12, 2006, https://sites.tufts.edu/jha/archives/41.
[11] Joseph G. Bock, "Firmer Footing for a Policy of Early Intervention: Conflict Early Warning and Early Response Comes of Age," *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 12, no. 1 (2014): 103–111, doi:10.1080/19331681.2014.982265.
[12] Madhawa Palihapitiya, "Ethnic Violence: A Case Study on Ethnic Riots in Sri Lanka," *Asian Journal of Public Affairs* 6, no. 1 (May 13, 2013): 95–111, https://issuu.com/nuslkyschool/docs/ajpa_issue_11.
[13] Ibid.

The earliest coexistence committees were based on ethnic denominations; they were not faith-based. Benefiting from the advice of a field officer, FCE was able to set up a coexistence committee comprised of Tamil and Muslim youth in a multiethnic town called Mutur in the Trincomalee District in the Eastern Province. These youths were identified through a sports festival. As a committee of interethnic and interfaith youth formed, FCE felt the need to expand.

There was an existing, much larger "formal" mechanism known as "peace committees," which were set up in the Eastern Province to monitor peace soon after the signing of the ceasefire agreement in 2002. The FCE realized that this mechanism was largely defunct. This was due to the fact that neither the government, the Norwegian peace facilitators,[14] nor the LTTE has bothered to convene them regularly. Many practical issues, like security and travel concerns, had sprung up after the ceasefire agreement stalemated. The FCE decided to absorb some of the membership of these committees and to develop our own critical mass using the model of "Co-Existence Committees." A number of these peace committee members were invited to participate in initial meetings of the coexistence committees, which were held in roughly the same areas where the formal peace committees had existed. They obliged. The following diagram indicates this geographic dispersal of the coexistence committees.

Figure 1: Geographic dispersal of formal coexistence committee infrastructure in Sri Lanka.

[14] The Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) brought in facilitators for the peace process as part of the ceasefire agreement. This group was comprised of primarily Scandinavian peace monitors who were connected with the Norwegian peace negotiators working to end the conflict.

These coexistence committees comprised eminent persons from all ethnic and religious groups in the Eastern Province, including a very large group of religious leaders from the Islamic, Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist faiths. FCE field staff, who themselves belonged to these faith groups, were tasked with organizing regular meetings, networking, and involving the membership in peacebuilding activities, particularly early response activities.[15] The onus for developing a separate branch focusing on religious peacebuilding was the long history of faith-based conflict in the Eastern Province, which province was highly representative of the country's religious diversity, with all four major faiths represented.

This formal interfaith mechanism developed by FCE became one of the strongest forces for peace. They blossomed as new relationships were formed between religious leaders and groups like Moulavis or religious teachers from the Muslim community, Buddhist monks from the Sinhala community, and Hindu Kurukkals or priests, and Christian priests from Tamil and Sinhala communities.

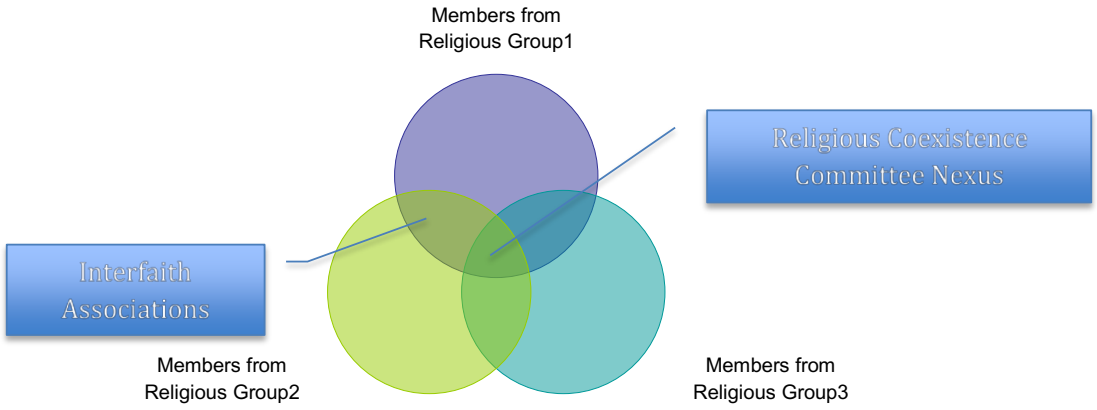

Figure 2 : The "architecture" of the "Religious Co-Existence Committee."

These relationships were fostered over years, some organically, but harnessed into early warning and early response mechanisms through well-organized and facilitated monthly meetings, trainings, and violence prevention interventions where religious leaders and groups developed conflict analysis skills, intervention skills, and—more importantly—an ability for joint action through "learning from doing." Considerable effort was made to explain to these stakeholders the principles of early warning and violence prevention. A special mediation training was also conducted for members of these committees, which spanned the entire Eastern Province. Particularly strong clusters of these interfaith associations were formed in and around hotspots near multiethnic cities and towns like Mutur and Akkaraipattu.

[15] Joseph Bock, Patricia Lawrence, and Timmo Gaasbeek, "Foundation for Co-Existence's Human Security Program in the Eastern Province" (presentation to the British High Commission by the Asia Foundation, Colombo, June 12, 2006).

Thus, these interfaith mechanisms were strengthened through joint action to predict and prevent violence, particularly religious violence. Overtime, an early response structure began to emerge that keenly resembled an interfaith and infrafaith collaborative network that was capable of quelling violence by exerting peer pressure on violence promoting intrafaith groups.

The following model, developed from the work by Joseph Bock, shows how the religious coexistence committee would exert influence on violence-promoting religious leaders and/or groups through a hierarchical intrafaith influence system that was tied to, and coordinated by, the religious coexistence committee as the central interfaith mechanism of the early warning and early response system.

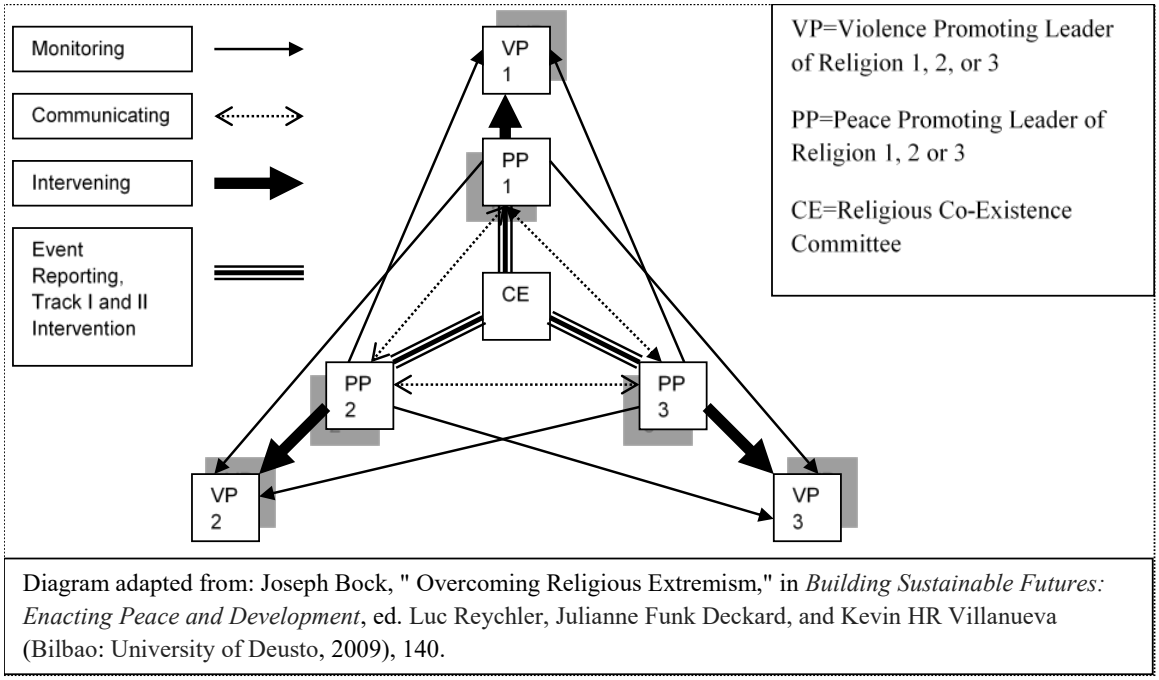

Diagram adapted from: Joseph Bock, " Overcoming Religious Extremism," in *Building Sustainable Futures: Enacting Peace and Development*, ed. Luc Reychler, Julianne Funk Deckard, and Kevin HR Villanueva (Bilbao: University of Deusto, 2009), 140.

Figure 3: Network structure of intragroup influence of religious violence prevention network.

When forming this infrastructure, as the architect of these early response networks, I took into account the existing religious leadership and focused on even the marginal leaders. By expanding the boundary of inclusion, we were able to bring in a diverse group of religious stakeholders who were able to collectively envision a future without violence, and a return to the peaceful teachings of each individual faith that had long been marginalized by the warring parties and whose adherents were uprooted, disbanded, or disturbed by the war.

The recruitment and retention of these leaders depended largely on the formal nature of the collaboration. Though neither legally not judicially appointed, the membership of this infrastructure drew some legitimacy from the official nature of the former peace committees established under the ceasefire agreement. However, special strategies were employed to recruit and retain additional members. A key recruiting strategy was a large periodic district-level convening of a summit of religious leaders and the formation of a centralized interfaith group attached to a network known as the National Anti-War Front (NAWF).

The NAWF was initially a voluntary organization of individuals and organizations committed to the idea of preserving the ceasefire agreement and working towards a peaceful settlement to the civil war. At the nexus of this group was a group of religious leaders who regularly used religious scripture to promote a peaceful resolution of the conflict. As a founding member organization, the Foundation for Co-Existence had direct access to this vast network of activists, including the religious peace activists who actively assisted FCE with recruitment. The NAWF religious leaders were also instrumental in designing interventions to prevent religious violence using the influence structure of peace-promoting religious leaders. Another key to recruitment and retention of religious leaders was a stream of successful and well publicized religious violence prevention interruptions carried out by this influence network. These "victories" increased the confidence of religious leaders and groups at the local level who joined the network and felt they were well connected and supported by the larger network.

These formal interfaith associations were very much the frontline of early intervention activities before, during, and after the outbreak of violence. An independent evaluation of the early warning system noted that the religious coexistence committees "became seriously involved in mediation" and that they were "activated immediately and could help with reducing tensions."[16] Prior to this, formal intergroup associations were found to prevent communal violence in other parts of the world. In a study conducted in India, formal interethnic associations, as opposed to informal interethnic contacts, were proven to have the capacity to intervene to prevent violence.[17]

The religious coexistence committees' capacity to conduct intrafaith as well as interfaith mediation activities was particularly useful for early response interventions. This infrastructure was regularly used to conduct on-the-ground interventions at multiple stages of a conflict cycle. A clearer example of the committees' effectiveness for early response is described in the following section.

The Religious Coexistence Committee Influence Network for Early Response Action

The religious coexistence committee set up by FCE was mobilized to mediate some high-profile conflicts in eastern Sri Lanka. For example, in May 2005, a Buddha statue was placed in Trincomalee City, the capital of a multiethnic District in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka. The powerful religious symbol created tension and rioting that lasted for weeks. Although it might seem unusual for a peaceful Buddha statue to cause violence,[18] in this instance, the statue was seen by non-Buddhist religious and ethnic groups as a symbol of dominance by the majority Sinhalese in

[16] Joseph Bock, Patricia Lawrence, and Timmo Gaasbeek, "Foundation for Co-Existence's Human Security Program in the Eastern Province," in *Third Generation Early Warning*, ed. Kumar Rupesinghe (Colombo: Foundation for Co-Existence, 2009), 216.

[17] Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

[18] As I have discussed at the beginning of the article, religious symbols can be both an incentive to peace as well as a threat to peace and coexistence. Religious symbols can be used by adherents of a religion as a rallying point against alleged blasphemers from another religious group, as having conspired to destroy a religious symbol or as having infringed on and being disrespectful of a particular symbol held sacred by its believers. See Joseph Bock, "Communal Conflict, NGOs, and the Power of Religious Symbols 1," *Development in Practice* 7, no. 1 (1997): 17–25, doi:10.1080/09614529754729. Religious symbols can also be used to indicate religious and ethnic dominance and as an incitement to violence for larger political reasons.

a region where the Tamil and Muslim minorities and their respective faiths had a long-standing religious dominance.

The statue was placed in the middle of Trincomalee on May 19, 2005, amidst opposition from the Tamil population in the area.[19] Leaflets were distributed in the city by an organized body called the Tamil People's Forum, which requested that the people in Trincomalee hold a *hartal*—or a general shutdown—on May 17, 2005. The leaflets condemned Buddhist extremism, urged people to "Sound the death knell to Buddhist chauvinism," and stated that the Tamil People's Movement would not tolerate any religious extremism of this kind in the capital of Tamil Eelam.

The tension was increased further after an unidentified attacker lobbed a hand grenade at the Buddha statue on the sixteenth night after it was erected, causing minor injuries to the statue. But the Buddhists had made a firm decision not to remove the statue at any cost. A Sinhala banana vendor was killed in a second grenade attack on the day of the *hartal*. Several more bomb attacks continued as the *hartal* crippled Trincomalee. Soon, what was a conflict over a religious symbol had escalated into a national debate on whether to withdraw from peace negotiations with the LTTE. Thus, the Buddha statue incident became the rallying point for Sinhala chauvinists campaigning against the ceasefire agreement and attending negotiations with the Tamil Tigers.[20]

It was during this time that a group of religious leaders from the Anti-War Front, with interfaith peacebuilding capacity based in Colombo under the auspices of the Foundation for Co-Existence, sent a delegation to negotiate peace in Trincomalee. The group, led by Buddhist monk Madampagama Assaji, brought all parties to the negotiating table. Using their seniority as members of the Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, and Islamic clergy, the group exerted influence on the local, less senior religious leaders who were instigating the *hartal* situation. If the visiting delegation did not have the requisite influence on the local leaders, they were able to find individuals with that influence using the NAWF's vast network of religious leaders. During subsequent negotiations between the parties, an agreement was reached to obey a court decision requiring the implementation of regulations against all unauthorized construction in the city. The *hartal* was soon abandoned and normalcy was restored in Trincomalee.

This case is an example of how a potentially peaceful religious symbol such as a Buddha statue can be used as a tool to create a wedge between different religious and ethnic groups. It is also an example of the importance of formal associations of interfaith mediation, particularly before, during, and after an occurrence of religious violence. The incident also bears witness to the effectiveness of an interfaith influence network in controlling and policing in-group violence-promoting faith leaders. And while interfaith mediators at the track one national level comprised of senior national leaders may perform these mediations locally during times of crisis, evidence also points to a need to build more localized "organic" intrafaith mechanisms that can be mobilized to prevent violence and/or to control in-group members so that religious and ethnic violence is quelled before it escalates in deeply divided societies. In the event the local mechanisms fail, a national body like the NAWF can be useful in exerting the necessary influence through the "rank

[19] Nanda Wickremasinghe, "Erection of Buddha Statue Produces Communal Tensions in Sri Lanka," World Socialist Web Site, June 9, 2005, http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2005/06/sril-j09.html.
[20] Ibid.

and file" of a religious group. However, for coordinating both types of interventions, formal intrafaith and interfaith coexistence infrastructure is critical.

Since coexistence committees can also engage in successful intrafaith mediation, a case from Sri Lanka can be used to further demonstrate the intersection between intrafaith and interfaith mediation within the infrastructure of the religious coexistence committee model. The case concerns a tragic incident, which led to an early warning and early intervention.

The Case of Intrafaith Mediation Within the Religious Coexistence Committee Model

Sammanthurai, in the District of Ampara in the Eastern Province, is a majority Muslim town. The town was relatively prosperous, with mostly farmers and landowners living in it. One day, during the ceasefire agreement, a Sinhala truck driver belonging to the Buddhist community hit and killed three Muslim civilians in Sammanthurai. Although largely peaceful, many eastern townships were always on the edge, expecting an imminent infringement on their right to life by another ethnic or religious group. Violence could easily be triggered with even the perception of an external threat. Although the death of the pedestrians was a road accident, it was recognized as a manifestation of that threat. Violent armed mobs can easily form to counter that threat.

As the tension escalated, and with it the threat of communal riots between the two communities, the FCE religious coexistence committee in the district made an announcement through the Sammanthurai Mosque requesting all Muslims not to harm members of the Sinhalese community in the area. The announcement was made within an hour of the deadly accident. At the same time, the coexistence committee of traders worked alongside the religious coexistence committee to reduce the tension and the possibility of an ethnic riot in the area. Also as an early warning activity, the coexistence committee members contacted the police and the police paramilitary groups to maintain law and order in the area. On the following day, the same early response activities described above were repeated. This helped to reduce the tension and to avoid communal violence until arrangements were made to release the bodies of the three Muslims from the Sammanthurai Hospital. Subsequent negotiations between the two groups were successful and peace was restored to Sammanthurai.

The case illustrates how intrafaith mechanisms, coordinated by a formal association of religious coexistence committees, can control in-group behavior. This in-group policing model is critical for conflict early warning and early response in that it places a damper on the destructive behavior of a group that, if unabated, would garner a violent response from other groups resulting in an uncontrollable spiral of "tit-for-tat" violence.

Utilizing Preexisting Interfaith Associations for Early Warning and Early Response

While creating new formal interfaith bodies can form a strong line of defense against the outbreak of communal and religious violence, tapping into existing associations and mechanisms within a particular conflict zone for coordinating conflict early warning and early response is also critical.

The Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC) of Kaduna, Nigeria engaged primarily in interfaith dialogue and mediation until 2013, when early warning and early response was introduced to the

center and its operations in the states of Bauchi, Borno, Plateau, Kaduna, Kano, and Sokoto in Northern Nigeria.

The goal of the IMC is political stabilization through mitigating religious extremism and defending religious freedoms with the aim of increasing religious tolerance and interfaith understanding. While this might seem a significant departure from previous generations of early warning systems, which were operated by academics, defense agencies, and "traditional" peacebuilding NGOs, the IMC's interfaith approach was proven a success given the nature and context of the conflict in Northern Nigeria.

Starting in 2013, the IMC began to develop its own community-based conflict early warning system based on an interfaith mediation model that employed preexisting interfaith associations as key mechanisms for conflict early warning and early response. The main body that coordinates early warning and early response at the IMC is the Community Peace Action Network (CPAN), which is comprised of the Community Peace Coordinating Centre (CPCC), the Conflict Mitigation and Management Regional Councils (CMMRCs), and Community Peace Observers (CPOs). Much of this infrastructure was preexisting. The CMMRCs, in particular, were formal associations between community leaders of different faiths and ethnicities. The IMC managed to realign these different community-based resources for conflict early warning and early response.

The CPCC is similar to the FCE Information Center in that it "collects, collates, verifies, analyzes, records, and disseminates early warning information for quick response." [21] The CMMRC is similar to the FCE Early Response Unit. Both the FCE and the IMC use field-based observers, which in Nigeria are called Community Peace Observers. These are trained grassroots-level observers "responsible for monitoring, collecting and disseminating conflict and peace information." [22] They were drawn from CMMRCs and other preexisting IMC community networks.

The CMMRCs are formal interfaith and interethnic associations and early warning mechanisms that currently exist in numerous cities and towns in Northern Nigeria. These mechanisms, coordinated by the early warning system, have had a significant positive impact on increasing community trust, religious tolerance, social contact, and peaceful coexistence in those areas. A quasi-experimental study conducted as part of an evaluation of the IMC's work revealed that harmful effects of religious intolerance, like derogatory name-calling for example, which increase intolerance amongst people were reduced through these formal interfaith associations.[23] These mechanisms also reduced segregation. The independent evaluation found: "Both treatment and control groups describe greater integration of their neighborhoods. From 2015 to 2017, the median survey response changed from "Disagree" to "Agree," an increase of two points on the five-point scale. Regression analysis confirms that responses unambiguously improve with each additional year of project exposure."[24]

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[21] "Community Peace Action Network," The Interfaith Mediation Centre, accessed July 26, 2018, http://www.earlywarningnigeria.org/cpan/.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ben Mazzotta and Alexander Brehm, 2017 *Midline Evaluation: Interfaith Mediation Center, Nigeria* (Evaluation Report, 2017).
[24] Ibid, 16.

The IMC has a rich history of interfaith mediation thanks to the center's leaders Imam Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye, who used to be enemies but joined hands to preach a unified and scripture-based message of peace. The IMC is an example of the need to utilize existing interfaith mechanisms for conflict early warning and early response.

Utilizing Existing Religious Infrastructure for Early Warning at the Local Level

Organizations like the IMC were established for the purpose of peacebuilding and can easily be used to engage in conflict early warning through training and the commitment of resources. But the vast majority of faith-based organizations have only one mission—to shepherd their adherents through life. These purely congregational mechanisms of faith can also be utilized for conflict early warning and early response. An example of a more local preexisting faith-based mechanism successfully mobilized to prevent and/or quell violence is the Mosque Federation of the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka.

The Mosque Federation proved time and time again to be an effective mechanism to control the threat of violence unleashed by various Muslim groups in eastern Sri Lanka through numerous calls for restraint and peace. This was despite the fact that the Muslims were on the receiving end of some terrible atrocities committed against them throughout the ethnic conflict. For example, on 18th November 2005, an unknown group of assailants pretending to be Muslim worshippers lobbed hand grenades into the Jumma Grand Mosque in Akkaraipattu in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka. Six Muslim worshipper were killed in the incident. Around 24 others were injured. The attack took place in a climate of escalating political killings during an election campaign period. The town of Akkaraipattu is about two-thirds Muslim and one-third Tamil, who are predominantly Hindu and Christian.

The Jumma Grand Mosque is situated on the borderline that segregates the town's Muslim quarter from its Tamil quarter. Clearly, the choice of the attack's location was deliberately chosen to create religious and ethnic violence. Soon after the attack, rumors began to spread of an impending massive attack by the LTTE and/or the Muslim groups in the area, some of whom were allegedly armed. Police troops were deployed in the area to control tension and maintain law and order; however, tension increased, resulting in an outbreak of public protest against the attack. This culminated in Muslims in Akkaraipattu declaring a general *hartal* or shutdown that continued for four days, crippling the town and the region. General shutdowns of this nature prevent all forms of public life, particularly transportation. As Akkaraipattu is a key transportation and economic hub for the District of Ampara, the *hartal* affected human security in the entire region.

Despite a formal statement by the LTTE that they were not responsible for the attack and a heavy security presence, the tension between Muslims and Tamils in the area continued. As a result, 600 Tamil families displaced by the 2004 tsunami and already living in temporary shelter sites in Akkaraipattu were further displaced to a nearby school in fear. By this juncture, the Foundation for Co-Existence's conflict early warning and early response mechanism had identified the signs of a communal riot scenario developing in the Akkaraipattu area.

The Foundation for Co-Existence performed a detailed analysis of the attack and communicated the findings to the religious leaders in both the Muslim and Tamil communities, thereby effectively reducing the circulation of rumors and holding at bay an impending riot. In

particular, meetings were facilitated between the Mosque Federation and Muslim community representatives in Akkaraipattu to discuss the issues and devise a strategy to prevent a riot between Muslims and Tamils. This was an effective strategy, as the Muslims considered themselves to be the aggrieved party facing an uncertain future in Akkaraipattu. After many rounds of talks, a breakthrough was achieved, thanks mainly to the leadership of the Mosque Federation.

The Mosque Federation of Ampara and the Mosque Federations in other parts of the Eastern Province released a statement calling for calm. Tamil community leaders agreed to ensure that the Muslims would not be hurt in the Tamil villages while Muslim community leaders agreed to ensure the safety of Tamils in the Muslim areas. The *hartal* was called off by the Muslims. The police announced the agreement to the public over loudspeakers and informed the public that the atrocities would not continue and people could move back to their normal life. After this intervention, normalcy prevailed in Akkaraipattu.[25]

The role of the Mosque Federation as a powerful lobby for peace and coexistence owed much to the role of a number of peace-promoting leaders within the federation. A noteworthy individual among them was Moulavi Kareem from Mutur, near the eastern town of Trincomalee. From a town with a majority Muslim community, Kareem maintained a strong relationship with the Tamil population—including the Tamil Tigers—and was able to act as a go-between and mediator, as well as a calming force for the Muslims as they tried to coexist with the Tamils in Mutur and surrounding Tamil towns.

The example of Kareem is not an isolated one. In fact, history bears witness to a number of such leaders and communities in the South Asian region. A similar example is Abdul Ghaffer Khan and his followers in India who actively promoted nonviolent coexistence. Known as the Khudai Khidmatgars of the Northwest Frontier Province of pre-partition India, [26] the Khidmatgars, under the leadership of their illustrious leader Abdul Ghaffer Khan, took measures to protect other religious and ethnic minorities in areas under their control. The Khidmatgars understood that "they could benefit from peace and liberation in the long run, that their own interests, insofar as they were legitimate, would not be handicapped by educating their followership about a third course of action that, although certainly no panacea, holds as much promise as doing nothing or attempting socially self-destructive bombings and shootings."[27] The Mosque Federation of the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka and its Islamic leaders like Moulavi Kareem also understood this principle.

Faith Leaders as Peacekeepers

While it may be a given that religious leaders traditionally function as advocates, healers, and keepers of peace in their daily preaching practice, the opportunity, skill, and political will to "peacekeep" in highly divided societies with numerous faith-based traditions is far more complicated in practice. However, on occasion, such religious leadership does emerge. The

[25] Bock, Lawrence, and Gaasbeek, "Foundation for Co-Existence's Human Security Program in the Eastern Province," in *Third Generation Early Warning*, 204.
[26] Robert C. Johansen, "Radical Islam and Nonviolence: A Case Study of Religious Empowerment and Constraint among Pashtuns," *Journal of Peace Research* 34, no. 1 (1997): 53–71, doi:10.1177/0022343397034001005.
[27] Ibid., 57.

following case illustrates how a lone Buddhist monk who was well received by the Tamil Tigers during a single negotiation round rose to the level of a peacekeeper through sheer will.

In October 2005, a Sinhala tractor driver disappeared while collecting sand for building construction in Tamil Tiger-controlled territory. This incident took place during a period of severe tension over the killing of a Sinhala police intelligence officer well known in the area by the Sinhala Buddhists. The LTTE was blamed for the assassination of the police intelligence officer. The tension erupted into violence. Several lorries transporting equipment and boats for Tsunami victims were attacked by a mob. Tamil civilians who were using the access road were assaulted. A vehicle belonging to the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) that went to the site in order to investigate the attack on the lorry was also attacked. The LTTE Trincomalee District Political Head made a complaint to the SLMM regarding the attacks. On 19th June, a Sinhalese paramilitary border guard was abducted by a group of armed men suspected to be LTTE. On 22nd June, a group of Sinhalese youth stopped a passenger bus traveling from Kantale to Mutur and assaulted three Tamil women. Within two hours of the attack, a group of Sinhalese youth came under a grenade attack, injuring three.

Meetings were convened by the FCE on the 23rd and 24th of June to mediate the violence with community leaders from ten villages led by five Buddhist monks on 24th June 2005 at Serunuwara. On July 1, 2005, the FCE took fifteen Sinhala Buddhist leaders from the ten villages under the leadership of the Chief Incumbent of a prominent Buddhist Temple to negotiate talks with the Tamil Tigers.

Amazingly, the Tigers had placed a white cloth on the seat where the Chief Buddhist Priest sat. This is a sign of respect that the Buddhist laity would perform whenever a Buddhist monk visited their home. It was unusual to see this type of behavior from the Tigers in their jungle hideout. Following this welcome gesture, which set the tone for the meeting, discussions went on for about an hour until the Buddhist priest stood up and directly addressed the Tamil Tiger political wing leader. He requested that the Tiger leader assume full responsibility for the behavior of the Tamil youth groups inciting the violence and that in turn, he himself would prevent the Sinhala youth from resorting to violence. The Tamil Tiger leader agreed to this proposal. The two leaders exchanged phone numbers in case of a future incident that required their intervention.

Not long after this incident, a van carrying Sinhala civilians was stoned by a group of Tamil youth. The Buddhist priest called the LTTE leader whom he had met and asked for an intervention. The Tiger leader agreed and proceeded to round up and punish the Tamil youth involved in the attack. After the strict punishment was meted out to them, the youth, now escaping the area, were identified and tied to a tree by Sinhala youth. The Buddhist monk heard of this incident and rushed to the scene. He ordered the Tamil youth to be untied and released immediately. This cemented the trust between the two leaders even further and no incidents were reported from this area throughout the duration of the war.

This case is an example of the courage and religious conviction of faith leaders to engage in peacebuilding, and how a conflict early warning system can harness the power of such leaders as mediators in violent conflict situations. A note of caution on utilizing these leaders for violence prevention is to ensure that they are not branded traitors by their own group. In situations of extreme religious and/or ethnic polarization and animosity, any faith leader who engages in

mediation or in any kind of "boundary spanning" faces the very real threat of being outbid and outflanked by members of his own group who might see coexistence as a threat to their own divisive agendas. Situating such lone leaders within a wider and more formal religious coexistence body would afford them more protection by way of a safety net.

Conclusion

Conflict early warning is defined as an information system that can provide timely information to decision makers on impending conflicts, humanitarian disasters, and the mass exodus of peoples.[28] Normatively, the concept of conflict early warning and early response is the prevention of violence by forecasting the timing and place of the eruption of violent conflict and intervening in the impending violent situation. In practice, the writer frames this as a set of operational principles that incorporates: *Right* information; provided at the *Right* time; to the *Right* people; in the *Right* format; for the *Right* action! For this "5R" concept of early warning to work, the focus must be local. I will explain this further.

Despite various early warning systems in practice today the threat of mass atrocities like the genocide in Rwanda, which heightened the need for conflict early warning, is still very real.[29] Most traditional early warning systems have been perceived as Western oriented,[30] egocentric, and designed by outsiders for outsiders.[31] Traditional, or first- or second-generation early warning systems[32] are quantitative analysis methods developed by Western academics, practitioners, and institutions over several decades to analyze troubling "trends" in various conflict-affected states and regions through the analysis of news reports. Western scholars, governments, and their militaries have developed and utilized a number of these approaches over the last several decades with very limited local impact.[33]

Studies and practical examples have demonstrated that these traditional early warning systems do little to advance the goal of human security in deeply divided societies. Further compounding the problem is the difficulty of predicting and preventing violence in societies where the violence is concentrated between state and non-state actors whose boundaries are constantly shifting.[34]

The examples in Sri Lanka and, to an extent, in Nigeria, demonstrate the usefulness of sustaining local or community-based early warning and early response mechanisms, and the merits of building on new or existing community associations— particularly faith-based associations—as both providers of early warning signals and key early response intervention mechanisms.

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[28] Rupesinghe, "Enhancing Human Security in the Eastern Province."
[29] Herbert Wulf and Tobias Debiel, "Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanisms: Tools for Enhancing the Effectiveness of Regional Organisations? A Comparative Study of the AU, ECOWAS, IGAD, ASEAN/ARF and PIF," LSE Research Online, last modified October 1, 2010, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/28495/.
[30] Rupesinghe, "Enhancing Human Security in the Eastern Province."
[31] Barrs, "Conflict Early Warning: Warning Who?"
[32] Rupesinghe, "Enhancing Human Security in the Eastern Province."

[33] Sean P. O'Brien, "Crisis Early Warning and Decision Support: Contemporary Approaches and Thoughts on Future Research," *International Studies Review* 12, no. 1 (March 2010): 87–104, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40730711.
[34] Ibid.

The examples from the two countries also illustrate the potential symbiosis between peace-promoting institutions of faith and organizations and/or experts implementing conflict early warning systems in deeply divided societies. The potential merits of this collaboration can enable the utilization of preexisting or new formal faith-based groups and associations to better coordinate impactful and timely violence prevention interventions while assisting proponents of conflict early warning to harness a highly potent critical mass of faith-based groups and their adherents situated in almost every conflict zone. It also helps avoid a critical failure of early warning: early response.

We have learned the lessons of failed early response from Rwanda, Kosovo, and many other parts of the world. When human security in communities in Syria was threatened and no action was taken to guarantee community security, groups—sometimes violent faith-based groups—were formed as a counterbalance to the Assad regime. This void was soon filled by Al Qaeda and the Islamic State.[35]

Early warning is futile without early response. Once an early warning is generated, peacebuilders must generate follow-up action by selecting appropriate response mechanisms (often predetermined), which in the case of faith-based peacebuilding would be faith-based early warning and early response groups. This is often followed by the identification of additional mechanisms/stakeholders on the periphery who receive the warnings (not often predetermined) and by the identification of appropriate method(s) of communication/warning (calls, text) and intervention design through consultation with early response mechanisms.

Early response mechanisms need to identify human and material resources in order to formulate the response. In the examples discussed earlier are the well-established community infrastructure of the Mosque Federations in eastern Sri Lanka.

The conflict early warning systems discussed in this article focused on the immediate de-escalation of ethnic and religious violence, and the formation of religious coexistence committees as one of its main early response mechanisms. These mechanisms, when formalized, properly networked, trained, and motivated can engage in serious violence prevention efforts with particular impact at the community level. The article bears evidence to the need to foster and incorporate these interfaith mechanisms as key early warning and early response infrastructure in countries prone to religious and other forms of violence.

As many of the current global conflicts have a religious dimension, early warning and early response systems that can harness religious stakeholders to coordinate preventative action at the local level are critical for any successful peacebuilding effort. It is hoped that this analysis, with its different dimensions of intrafaith and interfaith mediation efforts using community-based local early warning strategies, has shed some light on the path we must take as peacebuilders and persons of faith.

[35] This is quite the opposite of the model we are envisaging, but one that reminds us again not only of the consequences of failure of faith-based early warning, but of the limitations of interfaith mediation and peacebuilding in general.

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