Early warning system methodology

An early warning system for religious persecution

David Taylor[1]

Abstract

Agencies serving the persecuted church have shown considerable interest in the idea of devising an early warning (EW) system to give advance warning of potential threats to religious freedom. After researching EW systems in various fields and discovering that no such system exists in the human rights or religious freedom worlds, I decided on a methodology comprising a list of indicators accompanied by a set of explanatory notes and a numerical rating system. These indicators are designed to be used to monitor changes on the ground in countries where there is little current trouble but where the situation could deteriorate.

Keywords Persecution, warning, indicators, structural, state, social, rating, testing, monitoring, response.

Many working in the religious freedom world have long been interested in the proposition that it is possible to capture the experience of the worldwide church as it has faced new manifestations of discrimination, repression and violence in order to learn lessons for the future and thus be better prepared for it[2]. One potential beneficial outcome of this drawing on experience, which is only starting to happen, is that Christians from a country that has already experienced persecution can engage with and advise Christians in another country where something similar is potentially going to happen or where experiences are analogous. Examples might include Nigeria and Kenya; Peru and Colombia.

Another response is that Christians might learn how to adapt their behaviour (without of course compromising their worship and witness) to avert – or at least reduce – "avoidable" or "unnecessary" persecution which essentially stems from negative misconceptions/myths about Christians, often arising from disinformation, especially in the media. This could for example take the form of involvement in

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[2] For example, see Christof Sauer, "Researching persecution and martyrdom," *IJRF*, 1/1 (2008) 26-48.

social action or distancing the church from unappealing aspects of the West or its foreign policies.

However, the project which I particularly envisaged coming out of this experience was an early warning (EW) system that could use the lessons of recent history to identify potential trouble ahead of time and thus enable prophylactic action to be taken. Quite independently, the Religious Liberty Partnership (footnote) had decided that such an early warning system should be a high priority in its work and voted to take steps to establish one. When these two processes came together in 2011, the Early Warning project, which is the subject of this paper, was born. I set to work on developing a methodology and specifically drafting EW indicators, which seemed to be the best way of capturing these lessons in a usable format.[3]

1. Related research

I examined a number of analogous fields and models

Analogous fields: the best models tended to be in the drought/famine arena, which was the least analogous to religious freedom. The relevant academic, NGO and UN work otherwise mainly tended to be in the conflict prevention area. Apart from a few very complicated models, like those of Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and UNOCHA, hardly any seemed to have indicators or other actual EW systems in place (and where they did, they were often very local in scope). This was also the case for most genocide prevention work beyond Sentinel's work and a few identified "steps" towards genocide. Political risk firms in the private sector often produce country risk indices or similar. I found nothing of this sort in the human rights field.

Models: At one extreme were a few very complicated mathematical/social science formulae for assessing the origins of conflict and predicting it, which defy monitoring (or comprehension at all). Much of the academic work was either of this sort or, more usually, focused on prescriptions for how a good EW monitoring system should work. At the other extreme, many of the "early warning" examples I read were in fact non-explanatory analysis or even just narrative of events which was not linked to any system at all. Among the more practical models were the colour-coded private sector risk models which mostly, however, dealt in broad cat-

[3] I would like to thank Victoria Mbogo at CSW who has assisted me through much of the work on this project, particularly in setting up and maintaining the Wikispaces site; the RLP leadership, especially its chair, Mervyn Thomas, and facilitator, Brian O'Connell; the members of the RLP who have shown interest and provided encouragement, and particularly the RLP Early Warning Task Group who have provided helpful feedback, critiques and suggestions; and the numerous people in various fields who have provided me with leads to academic and other work in the field or given their time to discuss aspects of the project with me.

egories and (at the other extreme) the on-the-ground monitoring systems designed to provide warning of potential conflict in a very limited geographical area, and usually in a relatively immediate time frame. None of these models seem to cater for the EW needs of the persecuted church.

2. Scope and aims of the methodology

The indicators that I have drafted aim to provide early warning of risks of future potential religious freedom violations,/denial or persecution (broadly defined) by highlighting events and trends which are possible early precursors of them[4]. As such they inevitably touch on the question of how persecution starts. Implicit in some of these indicators are also sociological indications of why persecution occurs, although the EW methodology does not aim to probe the spiritual, psychological or other human motivations behind persecution. Answers to such "why" questions probably anyway lie outside the scope of an EW exercise.

These indicators are focused exclusively on potential persecution of Christian minorities. They could and should be expanded to include all religious minorities at risk, thus creating a broader Freedom of Religion and Belief Violations EW system. That will require specialist input from those familiar with the experience of such minorities since there may be indicators relevant to them that do not apply to Christians. Alternatively, if it turns out that this would be too unwieldy, separate EW systems could be devised for specific religious minorities, with many of the same indicators probably in play.

Indicator systems are currently drafted on a country basis. Clearly, in some countries, the situation varies widely from one part of the country to another, as is currently the case in Nigeria, for example. I have included an indicator that seeks to capture the impact of such regional variations, but further work may need to be done to generate region-specific indicators in a few cases.

When drawing up these indicators I have drawn on a number of sources. Most importantly I have learned from reading books, papers and reports over the years of my own involvement with the persecuted church written by practitioners in Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW)[5] and elsewhere and by expert authors, and by talking with these experts over the years. I have tried to capture their insights, drawing also on my own experience of the worlds of international diplomacy and analysis, to produce as rigorous and complete a set of indicators as I can. Therefore, this is a largely heuristic exercise.

[4] See text of the indicators in Appendix 1.

[5] www.csw.org.uk

The indicators start as far back in time as possible to add as much value as possible; so they are aimed to be used in relation to countries where there is little obvious sign of trouble or where problems fall well short of full-scale persecution. Examples might include Kenya, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Mexico. The indicators could be adapted to monitor a country where there is current persecution – so as to track any improvement or deterioration – but that would be a separate project, and probably not strictly EW. In any event this kind of tracking is already undertaken by Open Doors in its annual World Watch List.[6]

One of the challenges has been to devise a system that is at the same time rigorous and easy to use, especially for contacts providing information on the ground who are unlikely either to be trained in political science or to use English as their first language.

This EW system is ground breaking in both the human rights and religious freedom fields. There will therefore be plenty of scope for improvement and refinement, not least because it has not yet been tested through live monitoring.

3. Methodology

3.1 Indicators

The drafting of these indicators implies that it is possible to learn or derive from experience and precedent some patterns or sequences in the social, political and economic realms that represent potential precursors to persecution and that you can encapsulate them in a set of indicators. These are warnings of possible risks, not predictions – measuring the timing of an event is always the most challenging element. So they are not grouped chronologically. However, it might be possible with more work to divide them chronologically into a 1st stage, 2nd stage, 3rd stage sequence, although the inevitable crossover between them will reduce clarity. The disinformation-discrimination-persecution paradigm[7] might provide a basis.

There are 40 generic indicators, and four[8] that are available to be completed in the event that there is a need in a particular case for country-specific indicators that do not appear among the generic ones. They attempt to capture all the identifiable factors that could lead to the prevalent forms of persecution. In order to keep the

[6] Cf. Christof Sauer, Measuring and documenting persecution of Christians: A case study of the World Watch List, in *Mission, memory and communion: Documenting world Christianity in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Michael Nai-Chiu Poon, Marek A. Rostowski, OMI and John Roxborogh (Singapore: The Centre for the Study of Christianity in Asia, Trinity Theological College, 2013). Christof Sauer, "Measuring persecution: The new questionnaire design of the World Watch List," *IJRF* 5/2 (2012), 21-36.

[7] This paradigm of an escalation of events leading to violent persecution has been widely propagated by Godfrey Yogarajah, Johan Candelin and Paul Marshall, cf. G Yogarajah, "Disinformation, discrimination, destruction and growth," *IJRF* 1/1 (2008) 85-93.

[8] One in each of the four sections – see below.

indicators short and simple, a separate explanations document was prepared, providing clarification and examples in relation to each numbered indicator.[9]

After some thought and inquiry, it was decided to divide the indicators in two ways. Firstly structural factors were separated from dynamic factors. This seems to be a helpful distinction. Various EW systems that I have analysed separate structural and dynamic factors, although the terminology inevitably varies: Swisspeace's FAST EW system used root and proximate factors, and others describe structural factors as a country's predisposing or underlying risk factors. The Sentinel Project and SIPRI actually use three categories: structural factors (UN data etc.), accelerating factors (i.e. dynamic factors) and trigger events. Apart from the added complexity involved in a 3-way split, I tend to see trigger factors as very close in time to the risk being monitored and thus more of an acute warning than an early warning.

The second division was between state and non-state actions or developments. The state/social division reflects the recent history of the persecuted church, where bottom-up grass-roots societal pressure on Christians has become as important a factor as more traditional top-down government repression, as reflected in Brian Grim's well-established government restrictions/social hostilities division in his Pew reports.[10] One UN agency (UNSR) also includes a third category of international factors in its methodology, but these seem relatively unimportant and easily accommodated within a state/non-state paradigm.[11]

The structural indicators highlight the kind of permanent – or at least underlying and persistent – factors that characterise a state or society and that predispose it to the emergence of the dynamic trends that form the rest of the list. The dynamic indicators encompass both the secular and religious realms and comprise both general socio-political developments that are potential precursors and developments that more specifically bear on Christians or other religious minorities.

3.2 Rating system

I have designed the system so that numerical values relating to levels of risk can be assigned to each indicator. A numerical rating system allows establishing a starting point in monitoring each indicator and then to track both improvements and deteriorations in the area it covers. In other words, mitigating factors are reflected within the scoring rather than being assigned restraining indicators of their own, which would in most cases simply be the mirror image of the driver indicators I

[9] See Appendix 2.

[10] www.pewforum.org/category/publications/restrictions-on-religion.

[11] On this issue cf. Brian W. Grim, "Cross-national influences on social hostilities involving religion and government restrictions on religion," Pew Forum, 2012, http://www.pewforum.org/files/2012/09/cross-national-analysis.pdf.

have drafted. At the risk of complicating the rating system, we concluded that it was useful to distinguish between the importance of a particular indicator as a feature in the country in question and the scale or intensity of it at a particular moment. In some ways, this mirrors the structural/dynamic distinction, in which importance tends to concern features that are more enduring while scale/intensity focuses on the more immediate impact of events.

The intention at this stage is neither to compare countries by adding up respective totals nor to assess overall risk in a particular country or category by totalling up scores in any way. Nor have I grouped the indicators into categories (beyond the basic 4 divisions described above), which would enable scores to emerge for groups/categories of indicators, as commercial risk firms such as Jane's Information Group and Global Risk Monitor do. Nor for the same reason have I attempted to weight some indicators to give them more influence than others. In contrast to the commercial country risk models, the purpose of this EW exercise is simply to monitor the individual indicators to see if the level of specific threat in any one of them changes. In any case I am not convinced that such exercises, were they practicable, would yield any greater clarity or insight for our purposes, but further work would be needed to reach a firmer conclusion.

While the aims of the methodology do not include cross-country comparison as such, it will be important to ensure that ratings are consistent as between countries so that the overall rating system is coherent. It may also turn out in practice that useful light can be shed on the situation in countries both inside and outside monitoring by reading across to indicators that have been rated in other countries.

In order to keep the rating system as simple as possible, I was advised to restrict the scale to 1-5 rather than 1-10. The numbers between 1-5 signify the following in relation to importance: 1. Very minor; 2. Minor; 3. Important; 4. Very important; 5. Highly significant factor. And in relation to intensity/scale: 1. Minor; 2. Notable; 3. Significant; 4. Prevalent and intense; 5. Very serious and widespread issue.

3.3 Testing

Ultimately the soundness and usefulness of the methodology will be tested by actual use. At present, it is being tested live on three pilot countries. I had hoped that we would have had some results by now, but delays in responses have slowed us down.

In order to provide some pre-test of the methodology before live monitoring, we decided to see how the methodology would have performed in identifying the historical early signs of a real case of current persecution and also how it performed in relation to a current real case of a country in transition – based in each case on contemporary reporting. Eritrea was chosen as an example of state repression and northern/central Nigeria as an example of societal tensions; Egypt was chosen

as the current case. The exercise was imperfect since it relied simply on reading 1990s agency reports on Eritrea and Nigeria and a current annual report from one of the RLP member agencies on Egypt.

The results on Eritrea and Nigeria were very encouraging. No major issues surfaced that were not covered by the draft indicators, but the exercise enabled a few minor additions to be made. Of the then 36 active indicators (now 40), 15 came into play in Eritrea and 22 in Nigeria (probably because of the more complex situation there). A total of 30 out of the 36 came into play altogether. Likewise, on the Egypt report, 24 indicators out of 36 came into play and no issues emerged that the indicators did not capture. This admittedly crude exercise suggests that at least there is a good overlap between the reality of the early events that turned out to be the precursors of persecution and the indicators – and that the indicators seemed to capture them well.

4. Monitoring

The second stage of the exercise is setting up and implementing a system that enables live and effective monitoring of the indicators over time to track changes. The monitoring clearly needs to be a rolling, continuing process, probably stimulated by periodic reminders from a central coordinator. The system needs to combine swift, objective and accurate reporting from local sources on the ground[12]; monitoring of local and international media of various sorts to provide balance and broader context as well as a well-informed and rapid consensus-based assessment of the information. The latter is currently the proposed model for deciding whether any changes in ratings are called for as a result of a given development.

Further work could perhaps be done on whether such a qualitative consensus of experts is an adequate basis for ratings changes or whether some quantitative elements are needed (e.g. the number of incidents of the type under scrutiny in a given period). It might also be worth investigating whether changes in particular combinations of indicators (i.e. particular coincidences of factors), as well as increases in individual ratings, are significantly indicative.

As part of the assessment, there is also a judgement to be made about the significance of agreed rating changes and whether a change needs to be communicated to stakeholders as an early warning. Significant changes could include a jump in one indicator; a simultaneous rise in several; or a steady rise in one or more over time. Some sort of definition of what constitutes an "early warning" thus needs to be arrived at. It is then key to communicate early warnings swiftly to stakeholders in order for timely action to be considered in response.

[12] Whether directly or mediated through the participating RLP member agencies.

Local information sources on the ground will often be the direct beneficiaries of such an EW system, which will hopefully encourage active participation. They will need to be well briefed and debriefed at regular intervals[13]. Potential international, regional and national information sources and allies in monitoring (both Christian and secular) are numerous, limited mainly by the size and capacity of the central monitoring team to absorb information.

The above requires some kind of online information sharing platform. Something simple such as Wikispaces or Google docs might suffice, but the answer to this will emerge when monitoring is underway. It would obviously be helpful to create a track record of changes in ratings in the monitoring system database to allow seeing at a glance the recent history of changes and any patterns that emerge from it.

5. Responding to early warnings

The third stage is responding swiftly when the monitoring suggests that enough has changed that an early warning should be issued and action is required. This could be because trouble is now likely to break out in the foreseeable future, but also because prophylactic action could be taken to prevent a further deterioration. As indicated above, further work could usefully be done to provide a methodological base for defining an EW, perhaps going beyond responding to a jump in one indicator or a rise in more than one to look at changes in particular combinations. At present it is difficult to see how warnings could be accompanied by a rigorously based indication of likelihood, severity or timeframe of the threat in question.

The key overall point that must be borne in mind throughout is that the system needs to be simple to use as well as robust, particularly since few of the users will be political scientists or native English speakers. This is one reason why the indicators have been kept as brief as possible, but accompanied by a fuller set of explanatory notes clarifying each indicator.

6. Outcomes and benefits

Potential outcomes/benefits include:

- There is scope for action to forestall persecution rather than just react to it.
- Christians globally can be involved in prayer and campaigning ahead of persecution to seek to highlight it and prevent it.
- Proactive/preventative advocacy, quiet diplomacy, third country lobbying, media work, reconciliation work etcetera can be undertaken where appropriate.

[13] Lessons will be learned about the most effective type of respondent and how their monitoring of the indicators is reported as the monitoring phase develops.

- There are opportunities for capacity building, training, sharing of experiences/ lessons learned between Christians ahead of time.
- Early warning facilitates more effective forward planning and strategizing by religious freedom/persecuted church agencies.

Ideally it should be possible to monitor all the countries where Christians are at risk. In practice resources will probably restrict us to a few, at least for the medium term, depending on funding.

It may also prove possible to rewrite the indicators and turn them into a theory or model of improvement/deterioration in the outlook for religious freedom. Again this requires further thought and work.

Appendix 1: Early warning indicators

A. Structural - State

1. Previous history of disinformation/discrimination/persecution of religious minorities.
2. Laws or constitution privileging people of one religion or discriminating against those of another; or failing to protect religious freedom.
3. Autocratic regime, whether or not lacking legitimacy.
4. Weak central control and considerable de facto local power (e.g. Nigeria).
5. Political vacuum due to people's alienation from mainstream parties.
6. Any other indicators specific to this country.

B. Structural – Non-state

7. Previous history of societal hostility to religious minorities.
8. Heterogeneous societal make-up.
9. Wide levels of poverty/exploitation/unemployment/illiteracy.
10. Engaged diaspora hostile to religious minorities.
11. Particular geographical "hotspots" within the country with potential to generate wider problems.
12. Any other indicators specific to this country.

C. Dynamic – State

13. Political change that could affect Christians.
14. General deterioration in human rights or increase in authoritarianism.
15. Signs of weakening of existing autocratic regime (e.g. capacity of security forces) and growing insecurity.

16. Electoral or other political exploitation of religious/sectarian issues to achieve/maintain power.
17. Policy change proposals, court decisions or draft legislation disadvantaging Christians.
18. Culture of impunity/lack of redress among officials over social pressures on Christians which involve breaches of the law.
19. Official anti-Christian propaganda/hate speech.
20. Official suspicion of Christian social agenda.
21. Signs of emerging discrimination against Christians in politics, civil service.
22. Changes to education curricula on other religions likely to increase hatred.
23. Weakening external constraints on restrictive human rights policies.
24. Developments in a neighbouring country or the region which could negatively affect Christians in this country.
25. Increasing pressure, disinformation, discrimination, restrictions, persecution or other developments as in 13-24, negatively affecting other religious minorities.
26. Any other indicators specific to this country.

D. Dynamic - Non-state

27. Rising regional or sectarian threats to political, social or economic stability.
28. Migration or other demographic shift that changes the religious composition of a key region.
29. Growing culture of lawlessness and/or violence.
30. Deteriorating economic conditions creating hardship and tensions.
31. Emerging economic marginalisation of Christians.
32. Rise of religious nationalism or Islamism.
33. Increasing religious observance.
34. Increasing hard-line Islamist influence on government or society.
35. Calls for discriminatory/restrictive legislation on churches, charities or NGOs.
36. Emerging disinformation or calls for action targeting Christians.
37. Signs of resentment at church growth/conversions.
38. State or established churches/other religious authorities seeking to curb new churches.
39. Rise in secularist pressures and influence of atheist ideology.
40. Continuing or worsening church divisions and traditional confessional attitudes.
41. Irresponsible media reporting arousing passions.
42. Developments in a neighbouring country or the region which could negatively affect Christians in this country.

43. Increasing pressure, disinformation, discrimination, restrictions, persecution or other developments as in 27-42, negatively affecting other religious minorities.
44. Any other indicators specific to this country.

Appendix 2: Explanation document (for indicators 13-44)

C. Dynamic – State

13. This could be both orderly change (e.g. elections); or sudden/violent change (e.g. a coup or civil war); or advent to power of a group with oppressive ideology, rhetoric or record (e.g. EPLF in Eritrea).
14. This could include reduced civil society, press and other freedoms, judicial autonomy or police integrity; or promotion of collective/"cultural" rights over individual freedoms.
15. Examples include Syria and Iraq where Christians are put at greater risk of sectarian attack.
16. This could be a government, governing party or opposition party.
17. Examples include proposals for introduction of sharia law, blasphemy laws or defamation of religion laws or anti-conversion laws. This refers to actual judgments, policy papers and proposals as opposed to demands from parties and other societal groups (see indicator 34 and 35 under Non-State).
18. Includes failure by government or parts of it (e.g. local level, individual officials) to enforce the law to curb incitement to religious hatred; official "blind eye", tolerance or connivance creating culture of impunity, lack of accountability or redress over social hostility.
19. Includes talk of Christianity as a threat to national security, identity or majority religion; as "imported"/under Western influence/"fifth column"; of Christians as disloyal to state or having a political agenda. Also association with unattractive Western foreign policies (e.g. wars, globalisation, unfair trade, indifference to AIDS problem) and "decadent" social mores (see also non-state indicator 36).
20. Includes negative reaction to church speaking out, for example, on social justice issues; suspicions about Christian outreach to the marginalised (e.g. Dalits in India).
21. Examples include "glass ceilings" or exclusion from working in security services (e.g. Egypt).
22. For example Saudi textbooks demonising Christians, Jews and Shia.

23. Notably, waning Western influence on governments after Iraq, the financial crisis etcetera and rising non-Western (e.g. BRICs and CHIME countries) influence.
24. Examples including anti-conversion laws in South Asia and Iraq/ Syria spillovers.
25. Often what happens first to other religious minorities is an indicator of what potentially will happen later to Christians.
26. Any other indicators specific to this country.

D. Dynamic – Non-state

27. Includes religious/regional/ethnic/tribal/sectarian/land ownership tensions and exploitation of religion to secure property ownership, resources or other political/ economic advantage.
28. Includes natural migration, internal displacement and government resettlement programmes.
29. Includes lawlessness, violence, activities of criminal gangs or militias, political intimidation, for example, narco-crime in Mexico, Colombia; emergence of armed groups in Nigeria, India.
30. Signs include increasing hardship and unemployment; anger at falling living standards and/or corruption; envy of Christians' business/educational attainments.
31. One form would be discrimination in employment; another access to education.
32. Includes Hindu/Buddhist nationalist, Islamist or other extremist/nationalist groups, parties and gangs.
33. The key point is the influence on society and government of increasing religious piety/observance.
34. Signs include foreign (especially Saudi) involvement in/funding of Islamic groups and institutions; calls for sharia law; anti conversion laws; blasphemy or defamation of religion laws; rise of more intolerant forms of Islam.
35. Targets of such moves include "sects"; registration; anti-conversion; church building, access and worship; hiring of staff; Christian schools etcetera; publications; evangelism/proselytising; foreign funding or contacts; entry of missionaries/ownership of businesses by foreigners (aimed at missionaries); wearing of religious symbols; Christian marriage, divorce, burial, clergy training; social interaction including intermarriage.
36. Includes hate speech, dehumanising propaganda, disinformation, stereotyping, negative comment about Christians in sermons, speeches, media outlets, Islamist or other websites, blogs, forums etcetera (see also state indicator 19).
37. This could provoke a range of negative reactions.

38. Examples include Orthodox Church in Russia, Muslim authorities in Central Asia.
39. Especially in the West and other more economically developed countries.
40. Includes churches becoming more divided internally and in relation to other denominations; weak leadership; continuing "bunker mentality"; failure to respond to political change, for example, the need to be politically engaged in Arab Spring countries; departure/emigration of young potential leaders.
41. Includes reporting of domestic events (e.g. "abductions" of alleged converts to Islam in Egypt) and often of external events, for example, the same "abductions" replayed in Iraq, wars in Muslim countries, perceived slights to a religion or religious figures (e.g. Danish cartoons) arousing passions, especially when reporting is exaggerated or false.
42. Examples including anti-conversion laws in South Asia and Iraq/ Syria spillovers.
43. Often what happens first to other religious minorities is an indicator of what potentially will happen later to Christians.
44. Any other indicators specific to this country.