

governmental organizations. Some of the advantages and disadvantages of each of these sources are summarized in Table 2. Selected historical incidents can illustrate the practical problems and opportunities for the UN. Here, we focus on the dramatic moments when the Secretary-General first learned about major conflicts.

Governments occasionally submit reports to the Secretary-General on their own actions (in justification); more often they provide information on the actions of others (in condemnation). In 1948, Trygve Lie learned about the Arab attack on Israel (on 15 May 1948) through a cablegram from Egyptian government to the Security Council President¹⁸. As previously noted, he heard about the North Korean invasion (on 25 June 1950) in a mid-night call from a US official¹⁹. Dag Hammarskjold received allegations of a Vietnamese attack on Laos in a cable from the Laotian foreign minister (on 4 September 1959), who apparently magnified the threat. U Thant was informed by a US State Department official about the presence of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba (on 20 Oct 1962) two days before Kennedy's public announcement of the threat²⁰. Perez de Cuellar learned of the US-led attack on Iraq in call from President Bush a hour or so before the attack began (January 1991).

UN officials in the field can supply important and dramatic news quickly to headquarters. They are often the most objective sources, though they are often very limited in what they can observe (and anticipate). The arrival of the Six-Day War (5 Jun 1967) was conveyed to headquarters at 3 am (prompting Ralph Bunche to disturb U Thant at home) by the commander of UN peace-keeping force in the region (UNEF)²¹. Similarly, UN observers stationed near the Suez Canal informed Kurt Waldheim (6 Oct 1973) of the start of the Yom Kippur War²².

The news media is sometimes ahead of diplomatic and internal channels. Lie learned of the Communist coup in Czechoslovakia (22 Feb 1948) in a newscast on his car radio²³. U Thant learned of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia (20 Aug 1968) on a radio newscast carrying the Soviet Government's announcement of such.²⁴ He learned of the proclamation of independence of Bangladesh, and the ensuing violence (26 March 1971), in a report of the Indian News Agency (monitored by the Office of Public Information) which, in turn, cited the Voice of the Free Bangladesh Radio.

UN field offices routinely send excerpts or summaries of local press reports to headquarters but these usually focus on how the UN itself is being covered. Realizing that UN personnel who work in over one hundred countries at UN Information Centres (UNICs) and UN Development Programme (UNDP) offices are an untapped source of early warning information, Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar requested "the heads of the UN agencies and field offices throughout the world to inform him, on an urgent basis, of any situation that could give rise to a major humanitarian crisis."²⁵ The Office for Research and the Collection of Information