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## **Tampere Convention on Emergency Telecommunications: International Treaty to Ease Access to Life-Saving Technology for Relief Workers**

Victims of disasters should soon be able to benefit from faster and more effective rescue operations, thanks to the Tampere Convention on the Provision of Telecommunication Resources for Disaster Mitigation and Relief Operations. The trans-border use of telecommunication equipment by humanitarian organizations has often been impeded by regulatory barriers that make it extremely difficult to import and rapidly deploy equipment without prior consent of the local authorities. The treaty simplifies the use of emergency life-saving telecommunication equipment.

Disasters are considered to kill one million people each decade and leave millions more homeless. When disaster strikes, communications links are often disrupted; yet for disaster relief workers who arrive on the scene these links are essential. Questions that require information gathering for immediate response include: how many people have been injured or have died, where the injured are located, where they should be dispatched and the extent of the medical help needed. As well, workers rely heavily on telecommunications to coordinate the complicated logistics of rescue and relief operations.

In the absence of an agreed multilateral framework that temporarily waives formalities, delays have meant the loss of lives. "In emergency situations, telecommunication saves lives," said Yoshio Utsumi, Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union, the United Nations specialized agency for telecommunications, which, along with the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), has been a driving force in drafting and promoting the Convention. "With this Convention, relief workers can make full use of today's telecommunication tools which are essential for the coordination of rescue operations."

The Tampere Convention calls on States to facilitate the provision of prompt telecommunication assistance to mitigate the impact of a disaster, and covers both the installation and operation of reliable, flexible telecommunication services. Regulatory barriers that impede the use of telecommunication resources for disasters are waived. These barriers include the licensing requirements to use allocated frequencies, restrictions on the import of telecommunication equipment as well as limitations on the movement of humanitarian teams.

The Convention also safeguards the privileges, immunities and facilities granted to persons providing disaster assistance by granting them immunity from arrest and detention and exempting them from taxation and duties. As the first treaty of its kind, the Convention also defines the non-governmental organizations and non-State entities whose personnel would be granted these privileges and immunities when engaged in supporting the work of UN humanitarian and rescue organizations such as the United

Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), OCHA and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent societies (IFRC).

The Convention defines the overall framework for the cooperation among States parties and all other partners in international humanitarian assistance. It describes the procedures for request and provision of telecommunication assistance, recognizing the right of a State party to direct, control and coordinate assistance provided under the Convention within its territory. It defines specific elements and aspects of the provision of telecommunication assistance, such as termination of assistance and settlement of disputes. It requires States to make an inventory of the resources – both human and material – available for disaster mitigation and relief, and to develop a telecommunication action plan that identifies the steps necessary to deploy those resources.

The Convention requires a requesting State party to the Convention to put in writing, prior to the arrival of telecommunication assistance in a disaster zone, the fees it expects to receive or have reimbursed. To avoid excessive charges, the fees are based on an agreed model of payment and reimbursement, as well as on other factors such as the nature of the disaster, natural hazard and the particular needs of developing countries.

The Operational Coordinator shall seek the cooperation of other appropriate United Nations agencies, particularly the International Telecommunication Union, to assist it in fulfilling the objectives of this important Convention.

The seventeen-article, legally binding international treaty, was unanimously adopted on 18 June 1998 by the delegates of the 75 countries that attended the Intergovernmental Conference on Emergency Telecommunications (ICET-98), hosted by Finland in Tampere, about 200 km north of Helsinki. The Treaty was then open for accession, requiring 30 ratifications to come into effect.

Additional information about the provision of emergency telecommunications during relief operations can be found at [www.reliefweb.int/telecoms/](http://www.reliefweb.int/telecoms/)

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