



DISASTER MITIGATION VIA TELECOMMUNICATIONS: THE TAMPERE CONVENTION

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Abstract

Disasters, both natural and man-made, cause tremendous human sufferings and property damage. Since the early 1990's, the international community has come to realize that modern telecommunications can be of substantive help in humanitarian assistance. Consequently, the Tampere Convention on Emergency Telecommunications was adopted to facilitate these activities. This international effort was endorsed by various international conferences. In the future, the cooperation between public and private sector will still be crucial in properly and effectively implementing the Tampere Convention.

Disasters happen: they won't change

In 1999, about 105.000 people died in 326 major disasters;

Total property losses reached about USD 100 billion, the second highest level ever recorded;

1999 was not an anomaly. Compared to the 1960s, the 1990s has seen the disasters triple, costing 9 times as much (World disaster Report).

1 Introduction

A sudden and towering tsunami inundated a coastal country, resulting in huge casualties and loss of shelters. Communications with the rest of the world were totally severed. Within hours, international search and rescue teams rushed to the capital, as requested by the national government. The team leaders were stunned beyond belief when warned by the custom officials that hefty import duties must be paid for their telecommunication equipment, while their telecom operators must obtain operating licenses before commencing sorely needed telecommunication with the outside world. Consequently, precious time vital for saving human lives was wasted in the ensuing bureaucratic haggling.

Scenarios such as that described above are encountered time and again by various humanitarian relief agencies, both public and

private, around the world. This is most unfortunate in view of the fact that modern telecommunication equipment has proved itself indispensable in humanitarian relief and disaster mitigation. In fact, mobile and satellite technology has found usage in a wide variety of humanitarian-related fields, ranging from remote sensing for disaster mapping to global positioning system (GPS) for exact locationing of relief operations to real-time voice and text relays between headquarters and fields.

2 History of the Tampere Convention

The first of these gatherings was the Tampere Conference of 1991, which resulted in the adoption of the first Declaration on Disaster Communications. This landmark declaration is a statement of experts from major humanitarian organizations, regulatory authorities and the private sector. It became

the foundation of all subsequent work towards an international treaty to allow the unhindered use of telecommunication technology in international disaster response.

In particular, the Tampere Declaration called on ITU Member States to take all practical steps to facilitate the rapid deployment and effective use of telecommunications equipment for disaster mitigation and disaster relief by reducing, and where possible, removing regulatory barriers and strengthening transborder cooperation between countries.

The combined efforts of the ITU and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) of the United Nations led to the adoption of the Tampere Convention on the Provision of Telecommunications for Disaster Mitigation and Relief Operations, an international treaty, deposited with the United Nations Secretary-General. As part of its name suggests, this treaty was adopted in Tampere at the Intergovernmental Conference on Emergency Telecommunications in 1998 (ICET-98). The Tampere Convention was opened for signature in New York on 22 June 1998, and will remain open until 21 June 2003. Under international law, the Convention will officially come into force 30 days after an official ratification or "consent to be bound" has been received from 30 countries. As at 14 May 2001, the Convention had been signed by 50 Member States and ratified by eight. This treaty is particularly important for humanitarian organizations, which rely heavily on telecommunications equipment to coordinate the complicated logistics of rescue operations.

Very often, the transborder use of telecommunication equipment is impeded by regulatory barriers that make it extremely difficult for humanitarian organizations to import and rapidly deploy such equipment without the prior consent and approval of the relevant local authorities. These organizations include OCHA, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and other organizations. The Convention, among other things, aims to reduce administrative formalities of all kinds (licences, customs, charging, etc.) and to promote the drawing up of national plans and inventories of telecommunication resources to be deployed in the event of a disaster or emergency.

3 The International Telecommunication Union (ITU): a decade's involvement in disaster communications

- *1991:* ITU took an active part in the First Conference on Disasters Communications which took place in Tampere in 1991 and which recommended that an intergovernmental conference should be convened to prepare for the negotiation of an International Convention on Disaster Communications no later than 1993.
- *1994:* ITU participated in the Annual Meeting of the International Institute of Communications (also held in Tampere), which included a special session on disaster communications.
- *1994:* The ITU World Telecommunication Development Conference (WTDC-94) held in Buenos Aires passed Resolution 7, inviting ITU to study the technical, operational and regulatory aspects of emergency telecommunications; study charging and accounting in domestic and international disaster communications; and help developing countries, particularly the least developed ones, to prepare their telecommunication services in the event of disaster. The resolution also requests ITU to work closely with OCHA with a view to increasing the Union's involvement in disaster communications
- *1994:* The ITU Plenipotentiary Conference (Kyoto, 1994), endorsed the Tampere Declaration and passed Resolution 36 instructing the Council to address the issues raised in Resolution 7 of WTDC-94 and take the action necessary to implement this Resolution.
- *1994–1997:* The Working Group on Emergency Telecommunications (WGET) drafted the Tampere Convention. WGET is an open forum that facilitates the use of telecommunications in the service of humanitarian assistance. It comprises United Nations entities, major non-governmental organizations (NGO), ICRC, and experts from the private sector and academia.
- *1996:* The annual session of the ITU Council gave the Secretary-General the go-ahead to enable ITU to play an important role in the implementation of the future Convention. In October 1996,

the ITU Secretary-General consulted all ITU Members on the draft Convention.

- *1997:* The ITU World Radiocommunication Conference (WRC-97), held in Geneva in October-November, passed Resolution 644 urging administrations to give their full support to the adoption of the Convention.
- *1998:* The Valletta Declaration, adopted at the second ITU World Telecommunication Development Conference (WTDC-98), underlined the importance of emergency telecommunications and the need for an international Convention.
- *1998:* The ITU Plenipotentiary Conference (Minneapolis, 1998) instructed the ITU Secretary-General to study the possibilities of increasing the use of telecommunications for the safety and security of humanitarian personnel in the field and to report to the 1999 session of the Council for appropriate action to improve that use. Furthermore, this conference urged Member States to ensure that humanitarian personnel have unhindered and uninterrupted use of telecommunication resources required for their safety and security, in accordance with the national rules and regulations of the States concerned. To this end, the conference called on Member States to work towards the earliest possible ratification, acceptance, approval or final signature of the Tampere Convention.
- *2000:* The ITU World Radiocommunication Conference (WRC-2000), held in Istanbul (May 2000), approved revisions to two major resolutions. Resolution 644 invites ITU to continue to study, as a matter of urgency, those aspects of radiocommunications that are relevant to disaster mitigation and relief operations, including amateur radio facilities, mobile and portable satellite terminals.

Resolution 10 urges ITU Member States to take account of the possible needs of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement for two-way wireless telecommunication means when normal communication facilities are interrupted or not available. The Resolution also urges countries to assign to these organizations the minimum number of necessary working frequencies in accordance with the Radio Regulations, while taking

all practicable steps to protect such communications from harmful interference. The two organizations heavily rely on two-way wireless telecommunication facilities (particularly HF and VHF radio networks) for the efficient and safe conduct of their humanitarian operations.

4 An International Framework for Emergency Telecommunication Assistance

The Tampere Convention creates an international framework for the provision of telecommunication resources for disaster mitigation and relief between States and between a State and a non-State entity. Under this framework, a State which perceives the need for disaster telecommunication assistance in its territory will request such assistance through the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, who is the Operational Coordinator under the Convention and who will then channel the requests to other concerned entities. On the other hand, a providing State party is obliged to set down in writing the fees it expects to receive or have reimbursed. The fees, if any, will be based on an agreed model of payment and reimbursement, as well as on other factors such as the nature of the disaster and the particular needs of developing countries. Procedures are also set forth in the Convention for termination of telecommunication assistance and for dispute settlement. Nevertheless, this framework does not preclude the existing or future arrangements between States and between a State and a non-State entity in emergency telecommunication assistance.

Indeed, the Tampere Convention urged States and non-State entities to cooperate in facilitating the use of telecommunication resources in disaster mitigation and relief. This include the deployment of terrestrial and satellite equipment to predict and monitor hazards and disasters; the sharing and dissemination of information about hazards and disasters; and the installation and operation of reliable and flexible telecommunication resources for humanitarian relief and assistance organizations.

The States and non-state entities should also develop and make available model agreements and best practices which provide a foundation for bilateral or multilateral agreements facilitating telecommunication

assistance. They should also establish mechanisms for training and instruction in equipment handling and design and construction of emergency telecommunication facilities.

The Convention also recommends States to reduce or remove regulatory barriers that currently impede the use of telecommunications resources for disaster mitigation and relief operations. It further safeguards the privileges, immunities and facilities accorded to persons providing disaster assistance by granting them immunity from arrest and detention and exempting them from taxation and duties.

Under the Tampere Convention, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) will work closely with the Operational Coordinator on several provisions of the Convention. These include maintaining contact with focal points within States that are authorized to request, offer, accept and terminate telecommunications assistance. States will also compile a telecommunication assistance information inventory listing, among others, competent authorities and points of contact. This inventory will be maintained and updated by the Operational Coordinator with the help of the ITU.

As hinted above, it is worth noting that many provisions of the Convention are applicable to non-state entities such as intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental organizations. This is evidently important because non-state entities often work in conjunction with governmental organizations in disaster mitigation and relief operations. In addition, States which have not yet signed the Convention may also apply the Convention provisionally.

5 The road ahead

The application of the Tampere Convention depends heavily on respective national implementing legislation. Guidance and assistance, in particular to the most disaster-prone countries, is vital for the implementation process. As such, a Plan of Action for the Implementation of the Tampere Convention was developed by the WGET, with input from the different partners in humanitarian relief and telecommunication development. The action items range from a series of regional emergency telecommunications workshops and pilot projects for development of model agreements and best

practices in emergency telecommunication provision.

Following the appeals by Ms. Ogata, several consultations had taken place among the various public- and private-sector stakeholders in emergency telecommunications to devise strategy for the "pooling" of telecommunication resources by the private sector for use by humanitarian organizations.

The second Tampere Conference on Disaster Communications (CDC-2001), Tampere, Finland, 28-30 May 2001 shared the intent of ITU Resolution 36 which: "urges Member States to work towards the earliest possible ratification, acceptance, approval or final signature of the Tampere Convention by the appropriate national authorities" and encouraged partnerships with the private sector and other non-States partners in securing the aims of the Tampere Convention.

"Information on what has happened, how much damage there has been and what kind of help is needed, are key questions in disasters situations. To be able to answer them, we need a communications system that can be set up quickly and will guarantee of flow of information even when the local systems are inoperative. This is the focus of the **Tampere Convention** adopted in 1998."

Tarja Halonen, President of the Republic of Finland

Patron of the 2nd Tampere Conference on Disasters Communications. 28-30 May 2001

In summary, the synergy among the public and private partners in disaster relief and in telecommunications is as crucial for the implementation of the Tampere Convention as it has been for its adoption.

6 On the Internet

ReliefWeb is a project of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). At the following address <http://www.reliefweb.int/telecoms> you will obtain information and resources available for the provision of emergency telecommunications during relief operations, including the Tampere Convention on the Provision of Telecommunication Resources for Disaster Mitigation and Relief Operations.

7 About the Author

M. Harbi graduated from French schools and the University of Algiers in radiocommunications and electronics. He began his career in the Algerian Ministry of Telecom-

munications in the field of Frequency management (1965-1971). In 1972, he joined the Radio and TV Organization He was appointed Technical Director of this Organisation in 1977.

In 1980, he was appointed by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) as Senior Expert to advise the Gulf Cooperation Council (Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrein, EAU and Oman) in the field of Radi frequency Monitoring.

In 1981, he joined ITU Headquarters in Geneva as Director of the Regulation and Engineering Department of the International Frequency Registration Board (IFRB). In 1989, the Nice (France) ITU Plenipotentiary Conference elected him Member of the IFRB.

In 1994, he was elected Chairman of the new ITU/Radio Regulation Board.

From January 1995, Mr. Harbi is the Special Adviser to the ITU Secretary General in charge with the program of Telecommunication Assistance to be given to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Palestinian Authority, Burundi, Liberia, Rwanda, Somalia and the implementation of Tampere Convention on "Emergency Telecommunications".

On August 1999, Mr. Harbi was appointed as the Director of the Strategic Planning, External Affairs and Corporate Communication of the ITU. Retired on end February 2001, he his currently ITU Special Consultant on the " World Summit on the Information Society" to be hold in 2002.