

Helping Haiti

Dr Hamadoun I. Touré
ITU Secretary-General



■ As we begin 2010, we have learned of yet another, devastating natural disaster: the severe earthquake that struck Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti, on 12 January. We do not yet know how many thousands have died or been injured, but it is clear that there has been massive damage to the city and millions of people have been affected in a country with comparatively little emergency infrastructure.

One of the first pieces of news was the fact that — there was no news from the devastated area. All telecommunication systems were down and neither victims nor aid agencies could find out exactly what had happened or summon help. This is a dramatic example of the fundamental importance of communications in the wake of disasters.

It is a challenge to which ITU has responded immediately. From our ICT Development Fund, we have allocated some USD 1 million to support disaster relief efforts in Haiti. In addition, we have sent 40 satellite terminals to establish basic communications, and a further 60 units with broadband capacity have been dispatched (all previously donated by Inmarsat, Iridium and Vizada). ITU will also set up a Qualcomm Deployable Base Station. This is a complete system that provides a high-speed mobile network able to cope with data-rich applications such

as telemedicine, as well as voice calls. Experts are now in Haiti to help set up all this equipment, and to assess how telecommunication networks in Port-au-Prince might be rehabilitated.

ITU regularly responds to natural disasters. Most recently, equipment for satellite communications was sent to Samoa and Tonga, following an earthquake and tsunami in that region on 29 September 2009. Just one day later, the first of two major earthquakes caused great damage in Sumatra, Indonesia, and ITU sent satellite terminals there too. There have been many more instances of ITU's assistance, including support for relief efforts after Cyclone Nargis battered Myanmar on 2 May 2008 and a deadly earthquake struck Sichuan province, China, just ten days later.

We provide this assistance in partnership with our membership, whom I thank most wholeheartedly. It is literally vital work, and I appeal to all potential partners, among ICT companies and others, to contact ITU and join us in helping to alleviate suffering that most of us can scarcely imagine. The earthquake in Haiti is said to be the worst in 200 years. In the words of United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, it is a "major humanitarian emergency". ITU will do all it can to help.





The year ahead for ITU

Emergency communications was one of the areas that I identified as a priority for ITU upon my election as Secretary-General in 2006, alongside cybersecurity and closing the digital divide. They are of even more importance today. During 2010, ITU will continue to work hard in these fields, as well as on the topic of climate change that affects us all.

Progress on spreading not only basic telecommunications, but also broadband access to the Internet, will be reviewed in May at the WSIS Forum to be held in Geneva. It will look at how the aims of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) are being implemented, now that we are half way towards the target date of achieving those goals by 2015.

This year, ITU will celebrate World Telecommunication and Information Society Day, on 17 May, at World Expo 2010 Shanghai, in China. The theme of “Better city, better life with ICT” is in line with the focus of the Expo on improving life in cities, where half the world’s population now live.

Then, on 24 May, the World Telecommunication Development Conference 2010 opens in India, lasting until 4 June. As well as reviewing progress in this field, the conference will decide the focus of ITU’s future work. This is not simply an event for developing countries. Other nations and the private sector

should also take up the opportunities presented in partnerships to tackle the digital divide.

Mexico plays host to the other very significant event for ITU in 2010: the Plenipotentiary Conference on 4–22 October. It will see the election of ITU’s top officials and it has tasks that are of fundamental importance for the Union — reviewing aspects of ITU’s Constitution and Convention, and deciding upon a good Strategic Plan, backed by a strong Financial Plan.

I am very pleased to say that ITU’s finances are stable, and I am confident that we can maintain the membership’s contributions at the current level. Of course, we will also strive to do better. We need to look at making ITU’s funding mechanisms simpler and more predictable, while keeping the voluntary nature of contributions. Meanwhile, with our introduction of new management tools — especially those based on ICT — we should achieve greater transparency and efficiency. The basic aim, as always, will be to provide value for money for our membership.

The year ahead will bring opportunities for ITU to refocus on its mission to connect the unconnected — be they in areas not yet served by modern communications, or (like the population of Port-au-Prince) in need of vital help following disasters. It is a mission to which I, and all ITU staff, remain fully committed. ■