



WHO/ITU Themed Sessions on ICTs for Disaster Relief

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Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to the second session on ICTs for Disaster Relief, organized by ITU, in cooperation with the World Health Organization. At this morning's session, Mr. Yoshio Utsumi, the Secretary General of ITU, and our colleagues from WHO, highlighted the role of ICTs in facilitating the flow of health information to people who have been affected by tsunamis and other natural disasters. Having fast and reliable access to information and communication technologies after disaster strikes is indispensable for the coordination of relief activities, to disseminate information to the population and, above all, to save lives.

The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) was founded in 1865. After the United Nations was established, the ITU became a UN specialized agency for Telecommunications. The purposes of the Union are given in the ITU Constitution. Essentially, the ITU is to provide a forum in which the Union's membership can cooperate for the improvement and rational use of telecommunications of all kinds. ITU currently has 189 Member States and over 700 Sector Members.

ITU has worked on disaster recovery and mitigation from its early days. The creation of disaster resistant telecommunication networks has been a strategic imperative of ITU through the development of the telegraph, radio and television broadcasting and the Internet. We have done this by producing ITU Recommendations that range from SOS signalling to technical standards to reduce degradation or disruption of communication networks as a result of disasters. From the beginning of this new century, ITU has placed

disaster relief issues high on its agenda again as well as on generating significant discussion of the issue at all its major conferences.

ITU was instrumental in the development of the Tampere Convention, which was ratified early January 2005 and will ease the deployment of life-saving telecommunications equipment in emergency situations. We continue to study the regulatory issues that are vital to our work in this area and are implementing projects to ensure their success.

As we know, there are four distinct communication channels when such an emergency occurs: e.g. citizen to authority, authority to authority, authority to citizen, and citizen to citizen. These channels encompass a system to collect data from affected areas, a coordinated system to allow authorities and international agencies to exchange views so that a decision can be made in a timely manner, a system to inform the public of imminent dangers, a system to enable authorities to mobilize all resources necessary, and to coordinate post-disaster relief actions. In addition, overloaded traffic caused by a panic reaction may prevent the public communication network from functioning. Hence, urgent messages for disaster relief may not get through the network, or in the worst case scenario, public communication networks may be paralysed. In these cases we have to make sure that the public system is working properly. On the other hand, tasks such as upgrading the current disaster monitoring system, guaranteeing interworking among systems run by different agencies from different countries (or even within the same country!), and establishing an efficient public warning system, all these need good communication tools. New ICT technologies can improve our ability to react, and the internationally agreed standards that ITU develops are necessary to facilitate interconnection and interoperation. In these areas, I believe that ITU has much to offer.

ITU, with its competence and technical expertise is committed to cooperating with ITU Member governments, UN family organizations, the private sector, the scientific and industrial community and civil society in a joint effort to develop an integrated early warning system based on modern technologies. If requested, ITU is ready to study any new information and communication technologies that may contribute to early warning systems for disasters.

Let me reassure you of ITU's commitment in fulfilling its role as the specialized agency of the United Nations for telecommunications and our willingness to cooperate with all partners needed to get this essential work done.

At this session, we have invited 5 experts to provide us with their presentations, which cover Securing access to ICTs in natural disasters – Lessons from Japan; Easing the way to Disaster Mitigation: the Tampere Convention; and the ITU work on Telecommunications for Disaster Relief.

I hope you will find these sessions interesting and useful.