



By Gerry Oberst

International Emergency Communications

The satellite industry is recognized as a provider of communication resources for emergency assistance and disaster relief. A brief survey of the international scene shows there is a structure for relief efforts in which satellite resources can play a part.

Most recently, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) took action at its Plenipotentiary Conference in November to update its Resolution 36 — “Telecommunication/Information and Communication Technologies in the Service of Humanitarian Assistance.” The ITU also adopted a new resolution to emphasize how these technologies can help in emergency and disaster situations.

Resolution 36 stresses the importance of the Tampere Convention for the provision of telecommunications resources for disaster mitigation and relief operations. The Tampere Convention was adopted in 1998 at an intergovernmental conference in Tampere, Finland — the same year the ITU first adopted its initial version of Resolution 36 — and entered into force in January 2005. Fifteen European countries are among the 35 around the globe that have ratified the convention. The United States issued a supportive statement, although it has not yet formally ratified the document.

The Tampere Convention does not single out satellite capabilities but instead refers to all available technology, including “deployment of terrestrial and satellite telecommunication equipment to predict, monitor and provide information concerning natural hazards, health hazards and disasters.”

The role of satellites is nonetheless well-recognized. Speaking at a June 2006 emergency communications event also held in Tampere, an official of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) highlighted the role of satellite communications. “The satellites themselves are not affected by any terrestrial disaster and thus form a robust communications method in all circumstances,” Hugh Peterken, head of IFRC information systems, said. “Within IFRC the satellite often forms the backbone of communications in the first period following a disaster.”

At another 2006 gathering, an ITU official noted the significant contribution of satellite facilities to international relief efforts following the

December 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean, the October 2005 Southeast Asia earthquake and the May 2006 Indonesian earthquake.

The Tampere Convention, in principle, should help satellite organizations and aid providers to offer their assistance in these situations. Article 9 of the Convention calls for the reduction or removal of regulatory barriers such as restrictions on importing equipment, spectrum rules, limits on the movement of personnel and transit rules.

The importance of this provision cannot be overstated, because often it is bureaucratic snags that stymie the well-intentioned provision of emergency communications resources. The IFRC noted in June “the importation and deployment of satellite equipment can be problematic and can take a considerable length of time. Again, Tampere could provide relief in this area.”

The other resolution approved at the November ITU Plenipotentiary Conference (as yet unnumbered) calls on countries to satisfy temporary spectrum needs in time of emergency and to help emergency organizations to use any and all technologies to the extent possible for public protection and disaster relief. The resolution instructs ITU bureaus to continue efforts in this area, such as standardization for emergency telecommunications/ICTs.

One lead agency for emergency communications that could encourage satellite applications is the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Another relevant agency is UNOSAT, a U.N. program focused on making satellite imagery and other geographic information services easily accessible to the humanitarian community.

Against this backdrop, ITU efforts continue to foster satellite resources for disaster relief. ITU Resolutions 644 and 646 address disaster relief from the perspective of the radio regulations. They specifically refer to satellite communications and also support implementation of the Tampere Resolution. For its part, the ITU’s 2005 Handbook on Emergency Communications contains numerous references on how satellite resources can contribute to such missions.

Satellite facilities have an important role to fill for humanitarian assistance. Wading through the complicated international structure provides a way to minimize national regulatory restrictions in times of disaster when these facilities are needed most. ▀

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