

Disaster relief still seeks relief from regulations

The Tampere Papers

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Extract from a paper on Disaster Communications – three years after the Tampere Declaration.

IF ANYWHERE ON THE OCEAN A VESSEL with a crew of one is in distress, all related communications have absolute priority and are free of charge. This is stipulated in some 50 international regulatory instruments, from Article 1 of the Constitution of the International Telecommunication Union all the way to number 2923, Article 37 in Chapter IX of the Radio Regulations. The necessity for absolute priority of Distress signals has been recognised worldwide, ever since the 14th of April 1912, when the Titanic hit an iceberg.

If after an earthquake some 10,000 persons are trapped under the debris of their houses, any customs official can prevent the arriving rescue teams from importing their walkie-talkies. And any official can prevent the teams from using their communications equipment, unless they first obtain a license from a national telecommunications authority, whose building might just have collapsed in the earthquake. And if a team is, by chance, nevertheless able to use its satellite terminal, they are three months later presented with telephone bills for tens of thousands of dollars. Such is the sad experience of those who provide international humanitarian assistance in the age of information superhighways. This is, in brief, what led to the formulation of the Tampere Declaration. The name of this beautiful town has become a synonym for progress in communications for humanitarian assistance. I consider it a great privilege to report in this same place about the progress made since 1991. I am glad to report that we have recently made a big step forward. In March 1994 the ITU World Telecommunications Development Conference in Buenos Aires made the Tampere Declaration an integral part of its Resolution No.7. Admittedly, a resolution is still not a convention, but it is a milestone on the way to such a binding international legal instrument. The way ahead, to quote the title of the last chapter of the Tampere Declaration, looks still not easy, but Resolution No.7 has drawn a map for it. (Fig. 1)

The United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA), which is the successor to the Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Co-ordinator (UNDRO), has in this Resolution been invited to closely work with the ITU on the further development of Disaster Communications. We have started this work by establishing a comprehensive documentation that will provide an Inter Agency Working Group with the necessary background for a draft convention. In less than two weeks (September 1994), the Plenipotentiary Conference

Buenos Aires Resolution No. 7 Disaster Communications

The World Telecommunication Development Conference (Buenos Aires, 21-29 March 1994), noting:

the Tampere Declaration on Disaster Communications, issued by the group of experts in communications and disaster management participating in the Conference on Disaster Communications held in Tampere, Finland, on 20-22 May 1991, annexed to this Resolution,

and noting further

a) the support which the Tampere Declaration has received from numerous national, regional and international organisations;

b) Resolution No. 209 of the World Administrative Radio Conference on Mobile Services (Mob-87) Study and Implementation of a Global Land and Maritime Distress Safety System;

c) the studies carried out by the Study Groups of ITU-R in response to Resolution No. 209 (Mob-87);

d) the scope of studies in Study Groups of ITU-T relevant to disaster communications and, in particular in ITU-T SGs 1,11,111 and IV,

recognising

a) that disasters have caused and are likely to continue to cause severe human suffering, loss of human life and damage to property and environment;

b) that disasters may have particularly devastating consequences in developing countries;

c) that disaster preparedness requires the existence of decentralised means of communications such as, but not limited to, those provided by mobile and portable satellite terminals and by the Amateur Radio Services to supplement the vulnerable elements of the national,

regional and global communication networks,

convinced

a) that the fast and efficient flow of information is essential for disaster mitigation, prevention and preparedness, as well as for disaster relief;

b) that telecommunications can play a vital role in restoring the continuity of the development process,

concerned

a) that the development process is disrupted in the event of a disaster;

b) that disaster situations, as they occur, often affect or destroy existing telecommunication facilities,

resolves

to invite the ITU-R

a) to continue studying, as a matter of priority, the technical, operational and regulatory aspects of radiocommunications for disaster mitigation and relief;

b) to consider recommending the inclusion, in the agenda of a competent World Radio Communication Conference, of consideration of the relevant provisions of the Radio Regulations concerning disaster communications;

to invite the ITU-T to study, as a matter of priority:

a) the means of facilitating efficient communications for disaster mitigation and relief;

b) charging and accounting in domestic and international disaster communications, including waiver of charges, where appropriate, and a suitable tariff structure,

instructs

the Director of the BDT to help developing countries, particularly the LDCs, prepare their

telecommunication services for disasters and restore them in case of disruption,

further instructs

the Director of the BDT, within the framework of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, to help those developing countries which are particularly prone to natural disasters, in the development of early warning systems using telecommunications, including broadcast services, in the framework of the Special voluntary programme for technical co-operation,

requests

the Secretary-General to work closely with the United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs with a view to increasing the Union's involvement in disaster communications,

further requests

the Secretary-General to communicate this Resolution to the relevant international organisations,

invites

the United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs to actively contribute, in close collaboration with the ITU and in particular with the BDT, to the further development and strengthening of the disaster communication capabilities of developing countries,

urges

administrations to take all practicable steps for facilitating the rapid deployment and the effective use of telecommunication equipment for disaster relief by reducing and, where possible, removing regulatory barriers and strengthening trans-boundary co-operation between States.

Figure 1

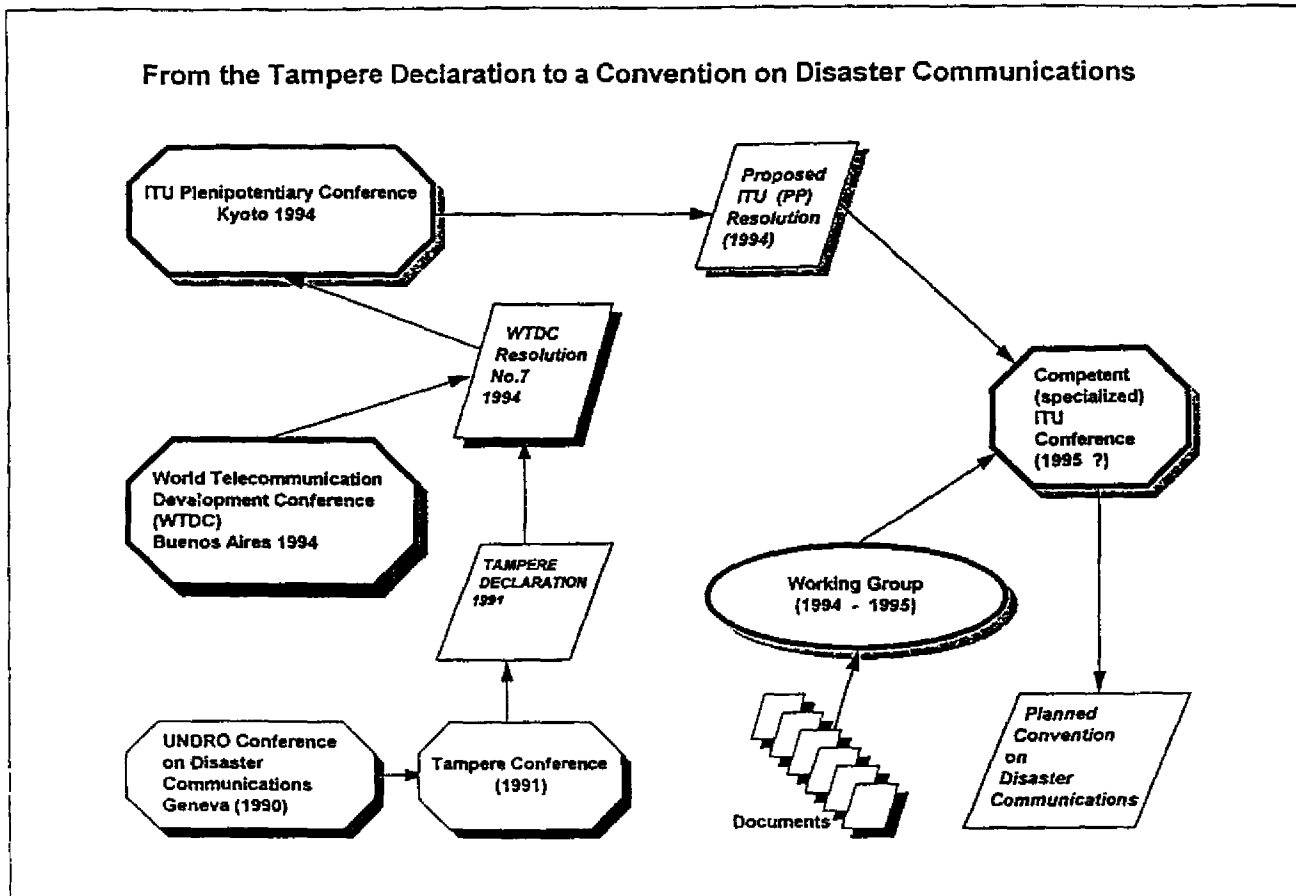


Figure 2

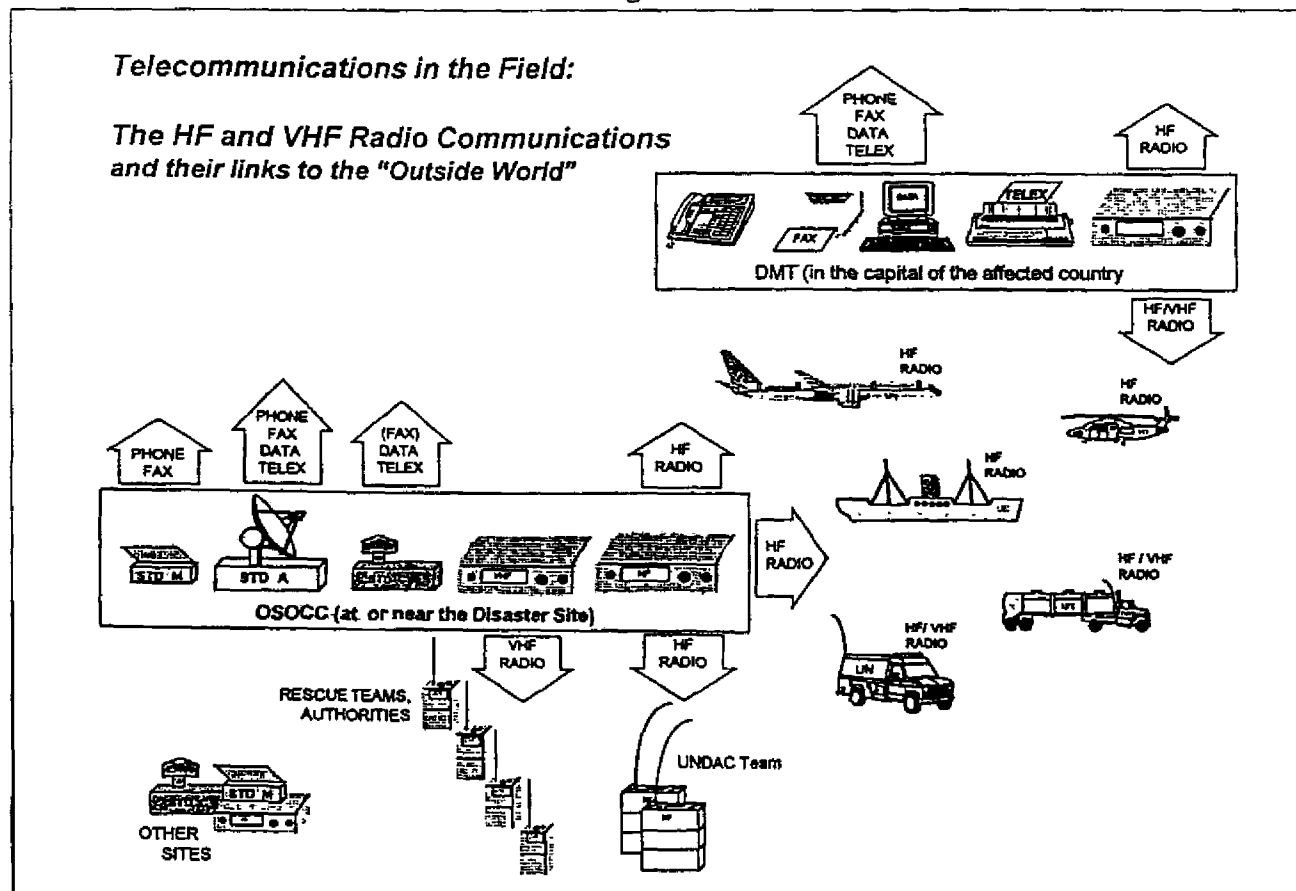
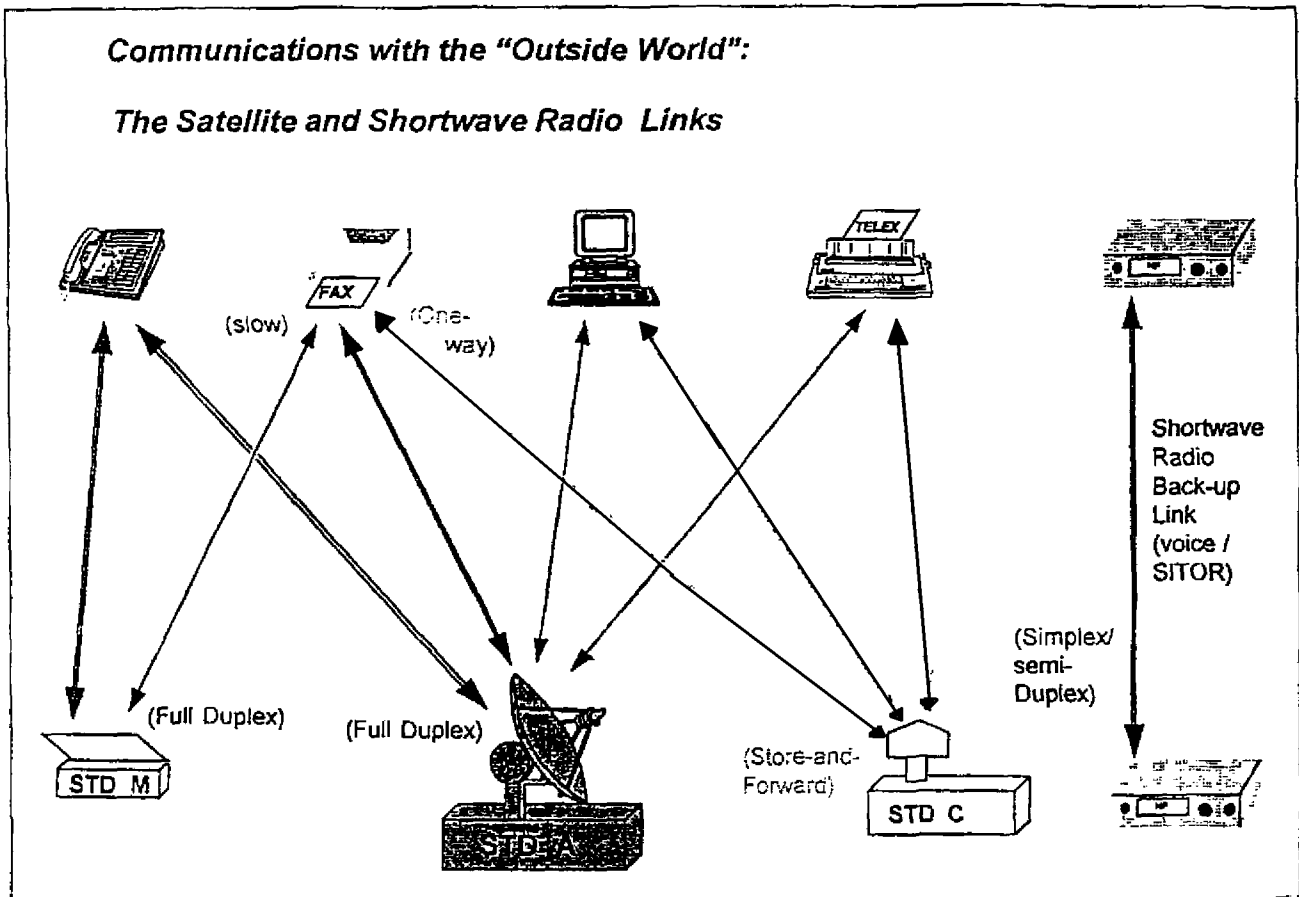


Figure 3



of the ITU will start its work in Kyoto. To consider a Convention on Disaster Communications in this Conference will not yet be possible, but we hope that the delegations will take notice of the Buenos Aires Resolution No.7, and that the Conference will endorse this document. We also hope that the Plenipotentiary Conference will instruct the next competent specialised ITU conference to consider the adoption of a Convention on Disaster Communications. Finally, with the ratification of an ITU Convention on Disaster Communications, all the international, governmental and non-governmental organisations and institutions providing humanitarian assistance, will be able to make full use of the wonderful tools the telecommunications industry has put at our disposal. Disaster Relief is good - Disaster Prevention is better, and where no prevention is possible, Disaster Preparedness can reduce the

painful consequences. The development and maintenance of appropriate Communications systems are, within the framework of the International Decade for Disaster Reduction (IDNDR), an integral part of Resolution No.7. As recent events such as cyclone "Hollanda" on the Island of Mauritius showed, the increasing use of modem technology leads to an increasing vulnerability of the communications infrastructure. To provide the regulatory framework for the full use and the encouragement of decentralised means of communications, specially Amateur Radio Services and land-mobile satellite terminals, must be important aims of a Convention on Disaster Communications. The United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs has however not limited its work on disaster communications to legal issues: under the newly established concepts of the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Co-ordination (UNDAC) Teams and

the On-site Operational Co-ordination Center (OSOCC), a disaster communications system has been established and used many times during the past two years, most recently in Rwanda. (Fig.2). Corresponding to the three levels of co-ordination of international humanitarian assistance, the DHA network links the relief teams among each other and with the Operational Co-ordination Center and this centre with the Disaster Management Team in the capital. It provides reliable links with the "outside world". (Fig.3) The necessary equipment for all these tasks is ready for dispatch from the DHA office in Geneva to anywhere in the world within hours after the occurrence of a disaster. We have the tools, let us now concentrate on the creation of a regulatory environment, which allows their unrestricted use in the pursuit of the most noble of tasks: the prevention and alleviation of human suffering caused by disasters. ■