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Disaster relief still seeks relief from regulations

The Tampere Papers

By *Hans Zimmermann*, United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs, Switzerland

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