



Tampere gives birth to a new Convention

As football fans throughout the world shared the excitement of the 1998 Football World Cup in the country of “liberty, equality, and fraternity” (France), history of another kind was in the making in the serene surroundings of Tampere (Finland).

On 18 June 1998, the city of Tampere gave birth to a new international Convention on the Provision of Telecommunication Resources for Disaster Mitigation and Relief Operations. The architectural beauty of Tampere Hall, where the Convention was born, does make it a place that truly offers “something for everyone”.

From 16 to 18 June 1998, Tampere Hall was the focal point of the Intergovernmental Conference on Emergency Telecommunications (ICET-98). At other times, the Hall is the city’s focal point for congresses, exhibitions, concerts, festivals, and other forms of entertainment. It is in this very Hall that the first Declaration on Disaster Communications was adopted back in 1991 (see *ITU News*, No. 4/98, pages 1–15), forming a solid basis for the extensive consultations and deliberations which have resulted in the Tampere Convention.

ICET-98 was opened by Matti Aura, the Finnish Minister of Transport and Communications. Other highlights at the opening ceremony included an artistic performance given by the Sympaatti Choir and statements from: Sergio Vieira de Mello, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator (who spoke on behalf of the United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi A. Annan), ITU Secretary-General, Pekka Tarjanne, and Jarmo Rantanen, Mayor of the city of Tampere.

The Conference was chaired by Ms Kirsti Lintonen, Under-Secretary of State in the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and on the closing day by Pekka Haavisto, the Finnish Minister of Development and Cooperation. Ms Lintonen was assisted by four Vice-Chairmen: Idriss Ngari (Gabon), Ms Yolette Azor-Charles (Haiti), Purkayastha Kabindra (India) and Andrey Krutskikh (Russia). The Conference also appointed a Credentials Committee chaired by Tara Singh (India), with Luis Alfonso de Alba (Mexico) as Vice-Chairman.

For three days, 225 delegates representing 76 countries* reviewed the draft Convention and the revisions made to it at an informal meeting in Geneva in April

1998. Both were presented by Professor Fred Cate who led the drafting team of the Convention. Professor Cate is a specialist in the field of disaster response at the Indiana University School of Law (United States). More fine-tuning was done to bring clarity to the text of the Convention and to quell the concerns raised by certain countries about possible loss of sovereignty.

To complement the discussion of the Convention, the secretariat of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) sponsored a special session on 17 June 1998. The programme of this session

The Tampere Convention was signed by 33 countries on 18 June 1998

* Some 22 developing countries received fellowships from the Finnish Government, the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the ITU.

comprised keynote presentations that highlighted the role of telecommunications in disaster preparedness and prevention.

The Tampere Convention was signed by 33 countries on 18 June 1998, in the English, French, and Spanish languages (the Arabic, Chinese and Russian versions will be made available in due course). As the depositary of the Convention, the Secretary-General of the United Nations has been encouraged by ICET-98 to schedule a signing ceremony in New York in connection with the 53rd session of the UN General Assembly.

The Convention was opened for signature in New York on 22 June 1998 and will remain open until 21 June 2003. Under international law, the Convention will officially come into force 30 days after an official ratification or "consent to be bound" has been received from 30 countries.

The Tampere Convention is the result of seven years of hard work by governments, and intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, facilitated by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU).

The Convention "is not a technical, legal document, that seeks to create detailed and binding rights. Given the subject matter, and the variety of contexts in which disasters occur, it could not be", said Professor Cate. "Rather, it is, according to the Final Act of ICET-98, a targeted effort that establishes an international framework to facilitate the provision and use of telecommunication resources and to foster cooperation for disaster mitigation and relief. It reflects the recognition by the Conference of the extraordinary impact of disasters on societies and the environment and of the need to provide timely, effective telecommunication assistance and resources for disaster mitigation and relief".

The Convention comprises 17 articles which provide for the unhindered use of telecommunications in the service of humanitarian assistance and should serve as a model for improving the legal

and regulatory environment in which assistance is delivered.

"In many emergencies, national regulatory barriers hinder the full use of telecommunications: consignments of equipment are withheld in customs for several months, or confiscated at the site of relief operations. Officials have also confronted relief workers with orders to prevent them from using any communication tools at all", said Sergio Vieira de Mello.

But things should change with this new tool. Indeed, signatories to the Convention will be obliged to do their utmost to reduce or remove regulatory barriers to the use of telecommunication resources for disaster mitigation and relief. For example, countries requesting external assistance following a natural or man-made disaster will have to waive their normal licensing and importation provisions covering communication equipment such as mobile phones or radios.

"Under its mandate to facilitate international humanitarian assistance through coordination, OCHA stands ready to accept the important role of the Operational Coordinator under the terms of the Convention. For this task we must rely, in the same way as for all our work, on the continuous support of the international community. Only with such support, and in very close cooperation with the ITU, shall we be able to assist countries in the national implementation of the Convention", Mr Vieira de Mello added.

As the Convention was being signed, another devastating earthquake hit Afghanistan, the second such disaster in the same location within four months. In disaster situations such as this, efficient communications could have helped save many lives, but again the conditions were extremely difficult.



Tampere Hall, the cradle of the Convention
Photo: P. Kuivanen (ITU 980095)



A partial view of the Hall
Photo: P. Kuivanen (ITU 980096)

"It is encouraging to see that many of the world's nations have been quick to recognize the benefits which today's communications can offer, and have chosen to lend their support to what, I believe, will be a great boon to humanitarian efforts around the world", Mr Tarjanne said at the closing ceremony.

Participants expressed their appreciation to the Government of Finland for their exemplary preparation of ICET-98 and for bringing the process which started seven years ago to a successful conclusion. In particular, Ambassador Henrik Blomstedt, Secretary-General for ICET-98, Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and his team received special thanks. Mr Blomstedt was awarded the ITU silver medal by Mr Tarjanne. ■

What does the Tampere Convention really mean to a relief worker?

We can only hope that the memory of spending days in jail, imagining the moans of the suffering ones, and then never getting the equipment anyway, will be a fading dream.

Successful disasters?

Can there be such a thing as a “successful disaster”? Well thanks to the ITU Members, perhaps more so.

Our disaster workers are involved in a desperate moment by moment struggle with grim horrors of a huge scale and need their communications at once. A surging sea of human suffering depends on it.

But we wrap them up in red tape, and treat them to humiliation and suspicion. You see, they have to assume that the wireline system is destroyed or disabled by the disaster. They fly in their own radio systems but they do not have time to arrange for the proper licences for the radios, and security approval for setting up the radio and satellite networks, for this can take months.

They end up in jail for their troubles and their vital and urgent equipment languishes in storage at the customs warehouse for months while customs officials take their time deciding how much excise duty must be paid!

Meanwhile frustrated workers have to rush around the scene in a slapstick farce of waste, indecision and duplication. They risk the ridicule of journalists, who by the way, are able to buy their way into an advanced telecommunication system that the humanitarian community can only dream of. If you ask any “Joe” in the street, he will tell you that there is only one

word to describe this way of doing business: stupid.

Tampere

Thanks to the Tampere Convention all this may one day change. Here at last is a framework for first recognizing the special case that disaster telecommunications really is, then having legal mechanisms for clearing away the obstruction and rushing in the help, while still protecting members from abuses. A system for clearly identifying both the equipment and the technicians needed for modern telecommunications and then rushing it through. A highly professional team of diplomats,

lawyers and engineers have worked for nine frustrating years to craft this fine instrument which is being embraced by clear-sighted governments from all corners.

You have to know that the non-governmental organizations and disaster relief community are very relieved at this turn of affairs. This is more than just a “pat on the back” recognition, it is actually an extended hand of help to pull us out of this mire, and send us on our way to do what needs doing now. We can only hope that the memory of spending days in jail, imagining the moans of the suffering ones, and then never getting the equipment anyway, will be a fading dream. — *Mark Wood, Disaster Relief Communications Foundation (United Kingdom).*

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They said...

“Finland’s engagement in relief efforts around the world, combined today with our expertise in telecommunications, has given us an understanding of how fundamentally important a functioning telecommunications system is in any emergency situation.”

(Matti Ahtisaari, President of the Republic of Finland, patron of ICET-98. An extract from the “ICET-98 Guide”, 16–18 June 1998)

“Humanitarian work is one of the most important, but also one of the most difficult tasks of the United Nations. Human suffering cannot be measured in figures, and its dimensions often surpass our imagination, even at a time when news about natural and other disasters reaches every corner of the globe in next to real time. An appropriate response depends upon the timely availability of accurate data from the often remote and inaccessible sites of crises. From the mobilization of assistance to the logistics chain, which will carry assistance to the intended beneficiaries, reliable telecommunication links are indispensable.”

(Kofi A. Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations. An extract from the “ICET-98 Guide”, 16–18 June 1998)

“Natural disasters — be they cyclones, drought, earthquakes, floods, wildfires, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis (tidal waves), or landslides — know no country, region, nor boundaries. They simply strike, causing loss of life and human suffering, damage to property and to the environment. Communication links are almost always disabled and disrupted during the first hours of a disaster. Preparedness and prevention are needed at both the national and international levels not only to avert disasters and mitigate their effects, but also to ensure timely relief to those in need when disaster strikes. This is a task in which the international community must cooperate.”

(Pekka Tarjanne, ITU Secretary-General. An extract from the “ICET-98 Guide”, 16–18 June 1998)

“There are so many people still missing and yet to be accounted for. It is really horrifying — people’s lives are nothing”, said Papua New Guinea’s Disaster Coordinator, Colin Travertz. *(International Herald Tribune, 22 July 1998).*

This statement was made in the wake of the tidal waves (tsunamis) that hit the remote coastal villages of Aitape in Papua New Guinea on 17 July 1998, virtually one month after the adoption of the Tampere Convention. Some 1600 people were reported dead and 6000 missing.

“There was no warning. Only minutes after a strong earthquake on 17 July, a 30-foot tsunami battered the coast. Arop’s wood and palm-frond homes disappeared along with most of its 2000 residents and neighbouring villages.” *(Newsweek, 3 August 1998).*

The following quotations are from the trio that was instrumental in making the Convention a reality:

“First, the Convention puts in place a structure for managing requests for telecommunication assistance and for minimizing the impediments to that assistance before disasters occur. Second, it creates mechanisms for identifying and evaluating best practices, model agreements, and other valuable resources currently in use by disaster mitigation organizations — public and private — and for developing new ones where needed. Finally, the Convention contributes the force of multinational moral persuasion to the importance of this subject and to the people involved in disaster mitigation relief. It recognizes publicly that telecommunications are essential to dealing with disasters, not just because reliable telecommunications are a critical underpinning of all other mitigation and relief efforts”.

(Professor Cate, a specialist in the field of disaster response at the Indiana University School of Law (United States). Extract from his speech to ICET-98)

“The Tampere Convention coincides with a dramatic increase in the number of disasters in recent times. Indeed, today, many in the international community have recognized that communication problems encountered in relief operations are no longer of a technical nature. The equipment is there, but the main obstacle has been, and still is, out-dated regulatory frameworks.



Photo: International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

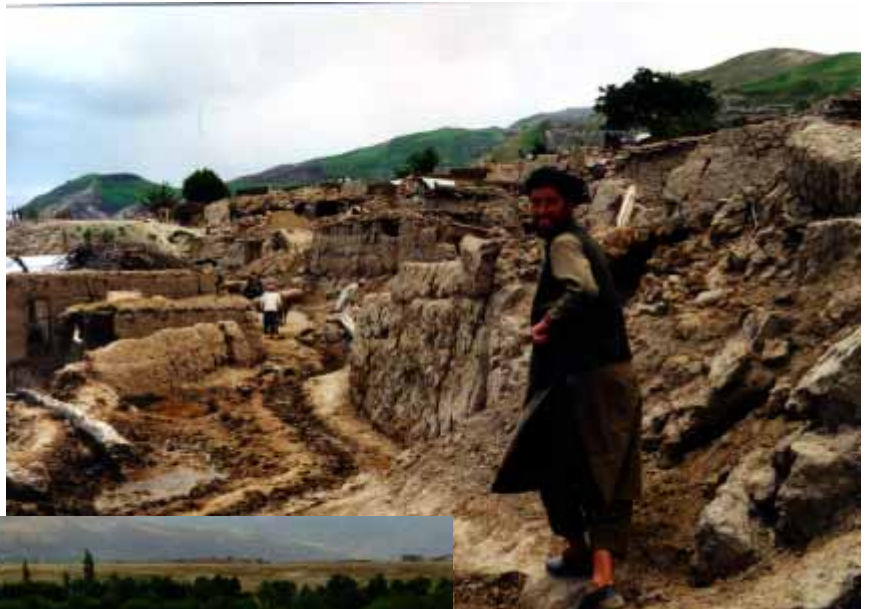
(ITU 980097)

At the same time, the relief workers, often risking their life in their effort to save lives, deserve every possible support. Unhindered telecommunications are a vital lifeline and will greatly improve their safety and security."

(Hans Zimmermann, Senior Humanitarian Affairs Officer, United Nations, Office of the Emergency Relief Coordinator)

"The Convention is the brainchild of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), which drafted the document in conjunction with national governments and international and regional aid agencies. The new Convention will mark the beginning of a new era for the world's aid organizations, who, for the first time ever, will be able to take full advantage of the power of today's sophisticated telecommunications equipment to bring rapid relief where it is needed, and fast."

(Mohamed Harbi, Special Adviser to the Secretary-General of the ITU. Extract from CommunicationsWeek International, 29 June 1998)



(ITU 980098)



As the Convention was being signed, another devastating earthquake hit Afghanistan

Photos: International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

(ITU 980099)