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World Telecommunication Day 1997

Telecommunications and humanitarian assistance

For World Telecommunication Day 1997, the Council of the ITU chose the theme "Telecommunications and humanitarian assistance" with the aim of highlighting the growing role of telecommunications in disaster mitigation and relief operations. The ITU Secretary-General, Pekka Tarjanne, has invited the organizations involved in international humanitarian assistance and the authorities of Geneva to closely cooperate in the 1997 event.

The loss of communication links after a disaster such as a cyclone, earthquake or war greatly exacerbates the difficulties for victims, as well as for relief workers, who have problems in ascertaining what kind of assistance is needed and where, in coordinating their activities, and in getting information to victims and their families. Also, traditional wireline telecommunications infrastructure is painstakingly slow — and often prohibitively costly — to reconstruct. A long-term lack of basic communications can be very damaging for those affected by a disaster, and the adverse economic consequences can make it very difficult for people to rebuild their lives. The International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR), 1990–2000, provides concepts to improve the disaster resistance of telecommunication infrastructure to optimize the use of telecommunications in early warning.

Mobile satellite communication networks and advanced technologies such as the soon-to-be-launched satellite-based global mobile personal communications systems are excellent tools for effective and coordinated management of international humanitarian aid. In addition, dramatic improvements in traditional means of communication such as shortwave radio, mean that this technology continues to play a

valuable role in disaster relief. These communication tools are also indispensable for the personal safety and security of aid workers, who often risk their lives in the dangerous situations created by disasters.

Good progress is also being made on ways to improve availability of such tools to governments and relief agencies by the removal of regulatory barriers which, in many cases, still restrict the full use of the valuable new systems which technological advances have made available.

It is with great pleasure therefore, that we make this first joint announcement for World Telecommunication Day 1997, and extend an invitation to all organizations, institutions and commercial partners

involved in telecommunications in the service of humanitarian assistance to join forces and participate in the promotion of the event.

World Telecommunication Day will be celebrated globally, involving the participation of hundreds of



Refugees walking the last two kilometres to the Nyamirangwe Camp in Zaire

(Photo: H. J. Davies/UNHCR) (ITU 970088)

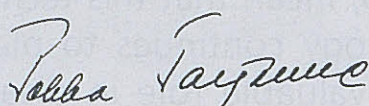
groups and organizations worldwide. In Geneva, home to many telecommunications and humanitarian institutions, an Open Day will provide the opportunity for the public to experience the important role of telecommunications in humanitarian work by establishing real-time links with other countries mounting similar Open Day events, and also with locations affected by humanitarian crises the world over.

Let us celebrate World Telecommunication Day in the spirit of cooperation as an important step towards the optimum application of telecommunications technology in that most noble of causes; the alleviation of human suffering caused by disasters.

The theme of World Telecommunication Day 1997 is a message of hope, and underlines the humanitarian mission of Geneva as a world telecommunications hub.

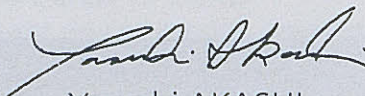
Geneva, December 1996

**for the International
Telecommunication Union**



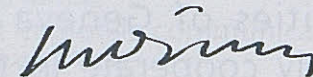
Pekka TARJANNE
Secretary-General

**for the United Nations
Department of
Humanitarian Affairs**



Yasushi AKASHI
Under-Secretary-General

**for the State Council
of the Republic
and Canton of Geneva**



Jean-Philippe MAÎTRE
President

World Telecommunication Day: mark your calendar!

It has become a tradition for the founding of the International Telecommunication Union to be celebrated every year on 17 May, and activities centred around a specific theme are organized worldwide to mark the occasion. The theme for 1997, "Telecommunications and humanitarian assistance", has been chosen to highlight the increasingly important role that telecommunications play in disaster mitigation and relief efforts.

This year's celebrations will begin on 15 May with a press conference at Geneva City Hall given by Jean-Philippe Maître, President of the State Council of the Republic and Canton of Geneva, Yasushi Akashi, Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs, and Pekka Tarjanne, Secretary-General of the ITU.

A tent will be erected at the Place des Nations, housing a temporary telecommunication centre. On 16 May the centre will be formally inaugurated, in a ceremony featuring a release of pigeons as a symbol of communications.

A number of international organizations will be in attendance, among them the International Committee of the Red Cross, the United Nations, represented by its Department of Humanitarian Affairs, and ITU.

The tent will be open to the public every day from 17 to 22 May, from 10h00 to 19h00. Demonstrations will be given all week long on the part that telecommunications play in disaster relief efforts. In particular, there will be presentations on the role of radioamateurs, short-wave voice and data communications, UHF/VHF communications and satellite telecommunications with Inmarsat terminals.

As a hands-on experience, visitors will have the opportunity to send and receive messages on a VHF network.

In addition, an Internet website has been set up, which visitors to the centre will be able to access directly (<http://www.fema.gov/itu-wtd97>).

Also in conjunction with the celebrations, the International School of Geneva has organized a drawing competition on the theme of this year's World Telecommunication Day. Winners will be announced early in May.

The following two articles illustrate the WTD-97 theme and give a good insight into the importance of telecommunications in emergency situations and also into the difficulties which still remain when providing assistance.