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(ITU) للاتصالات الدولي الاتحاد في والمحفوظات المكتبة قسم أجراه الضوئي بالمسح تصوير نتاج (PDF) الإلكترونية النسخة هذه والمحفوظات المكتبة قسم في المتوفرة الوثائق ضمن أصلية ورقية وثيقة من نقلاً.

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Telecommunications and humanitarian assistance

17 May 1997

Each year on the 17th of May, the International Telecommunication Union celebrates World Telecommunication Day to commemorate its founding in Paris a hundred and thirty-two years ago. This year, our chosen theme for the event "Telecommunications and humanitarian assistance" is one which I believe is of great significance, both in acknowledging the important part our work has played in emergency aid operations in the past, and in looking at the benefits new kinds of telecommunication technologies might be able to offer in the future.

Almost since its earliest days, telecommunications has played an important role in disaster relief. The ability to communicate over distance — provided initially by the telegraph and later by the invention of the telephone and the development of radiocommunications — made telecommunications ideally suited to use in emergency situations, both in getting help to those involved, and in getting information to the outside world.

Perhaps no more graphic example can be found than in the events surrounding the sinking of the *Titanic* during the night of 14 to 15 April 1912. Radiocommunication technology was instrumental in soliciting aid from the nearby vessels *California* and *Carpathia*, which were able to proceed to the rescue. Sadly, many more lives could probably have been saved had other vessels in the vicinity been equipped with radiocommunication systems. As it was, they remained oblivious to the tragedy unfolding around them that night, and about 1500 people lost their lives.

The importance of radiocommunications in maritime safety has not diminished, and this technology also plays a vital role in emergency relief operations on the ground. Every year, teams of dedicated field workers from a wide range of national and international aid agencies work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of those caught up in natural and man-made disasters. The mainstay of a great many of these operations continues to be the messages received and transmitted by simple radio systems.

Today, thanks to the very rapid development of mobile telephony, new ways of communicating with people struck by disaster or working in a disaster zone are

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also available. Whilst they will never replace radio in certain situations, mobile telephones have become indispensable as a means of getting information to victims. They are also invaluable tools for relief workers, who are able to coordinate team activities while in the field, and quickly mobilize emergency actions such as evacuations. The ability to provide communications on-the-move, and to provide continuity of communications despite localized damage to the ordinary telephone network, have made mobile telecommunications technology a great working tool in the field of humanitarian aid.

But even mobile telephony systems cannot help where there is widespread damage to the telephone network, which can occur following a natural disaster, such as a cyclone or earthquake, or a man-made one, such as a war. To deal with these kinds of crises, we will in the near future most probably turn to a new breed of telecommunications system, based around constellations of low and medium earth orbiting satellites. Several of these new systems are due to be launched over the next five years or so, and they bring with them the promise of seamless global mobile telephony, regardless of the whereabouts of the user, or the existence of on-the-ground telecommunications infrastructure. When fully implemented, they could prove to be a great asset in the effort to save lives and ease the suffering of those affected by large-scale disasters.

It is perhaps sad to reflect that disasters of one kind or another will go on affecting the population of our planet. Unpredictable and dramatic changes in weather, geological upheavals, and even people's inability to live peacefully with their neighbours, are factors too large in scale ever to be under our control. But it is heartening to me, as Secretary-General of the ITU, to know that our work in the development of new communication technologies has gone — and will continue to go — a long way towards lessening the impact of such events on the lives of ordinary people.

Let us therefore celebrate World Telecommunication Day in a spirit of optimism, recognizing the great achievements of the past, as well as those yet to come. Communications is about bringing people together, and helping one another. Humanitarian assistance embodies this communications ideal, and I can think of no better application of the ITU's work over the last one hundred and thirty-two years.

Pekka Tarjanne
Secretary-General