ICT Emergency Cell Working Group – Addis Ababa/Tigray region

Date: 25/05/2021   Time: 14:00

Online Meeting

Attendance

Chair	Rami Shakra (UNHCR Senior IT Emergency Coordinator)
IOM	Gaylord Cofie
Office of the RC	DaEun Han
UNDSS	Dereje Bezabih
UNHCR	Abdalla Khalil
	Joan Opio
	Min Sun
UNOCHA	Nickie Wing
UNICEF	Yogendra Rai
WFP	Tinsae Gidey
	Khawar Ilyas
	Elizabeth Millership

Agenda

1. General updates
2. UN harmonization project
3. Election preparedness
4. Initial feedback from group on call centre management SOP by UNDSS
5. Security communications activities in Mekelle

1. General updates

WFP –

- The WFP ICT Coordinator [Khawar Ilyas] and Information Management Officer (IMO) [Elizabeth Millership] have been on the ground in Mekelle since 11 May.

- WFP has submitted a CERF funding request of US$500,000 to cover security communications, data connectivity services and capacity building sessions in three locations in Tigray – Mekelle, Shire and Embamadre – for three months.

- Following discussions with OCHA, WFP may revise and expand its operational plan to include support for up to five locations in Tigray where common operational hubs may be established by OCHA. OCHA will make decisions on the scale-up in the coming days, following further engagement with actors on the ground.

- A letter was sent from the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) to the Emergency Resident Coordinator (ERC) on 24 May to request the formal activation of the Emergency Telecommunications Cluster (ETC). The letter has been circulated to all heads of agencies. If no objections are received by COB on 25 May, the ERC will reply to confirm ETC activation in Tigray.

- Internet connectivity services in Mekelle are currently very poor for the entire humanitarian community, in both accommodation and offices. WFP is following up with Ethio Telecom to resolve the technical issues.

- WFP/ETC is planning to send a short survey on the status of data connectivity services to all UN and NGO partners in Mekelle to map the availability of services and to understand the challenges.

- Since 17 May, WFP/ETC has initiated a radio training programme for all WFP drivers and Local Security Assistants (LSAs) in Mekelle to update them on radio protocol and convoy procedures. Once completed in Mekelle, the same will be carried out in Shire and offered at the inter-agency level. This initiative will complement the UN harmonization project.

- The first security communications Working Group meeting was held on 24 May to discuss operational challenges, protocols, and the need to develop the Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) established by UNDSS.

UNHCR –

- UNHCR is exploring options to provide immediate Internet connectivity services to partners in Mekelle who currently have no access, including making its connectivity services available at the UNHCR office.

- There are reports that local UN staff are avoiding carrying their handheld radios due to the security situation in Tigray. There is a need for some advisory guidance which the ICT Emergency Cell can issue to UN agencies on this point. Currently, the decision is with individual agencies.

  - **Action point**: Nickie Wing to share reports via the next OCHA meeting that local UN staff do not feel safe carrying their handheld radios due to the security situation. Advisory guidance is needed which can be issued to UN agencies.

2. UN harmonization project

- The enhancement of security communications infrastructure in the Tigray region is a high priority.

- WFP/ETC is supporting the roll out the UN harmonization project in **Mekelle** including the reprogramming of all UN agency VHF handheld and vehicle radios. The exercise was due to be completed on 21 May in Mekelle. Due to challenges with availability of vehicles and staff radios, the roll out has been extended by a week. There is a need for increased engagement with some agencies – particularly WHO and UNICEF – to bring in their radios for reprogramming.

- o ***Action point***: When programming kit is received, UNHCR technician [Joan Opio] to reprogramme all UNHCR radios in Mekelle, including handhelds, in vehicles and the Security Operations Centre (SOC).

- o ***Action point***: The Cell members to support by requesting focal points in WHO and UNICEF to bring in their agencies' handheld radios and vehicles so WFP can complete the reprogramming exercise in Mekelle. Nickie Wing to include the request for all UN agencies to engage with WFP's harmonization activities in Mekelle in the next Tigray Access Working Group meeting.

- On 22 May, WFP/ETC tested the coverage of the VHF radio network in Mekelle provided by both the WFP and UNICEF/UNDSS repeaters and found that most sites were adequately covered. Next step is to develop procedures and deliver training to staff on using the radio channels.

- There are some radio devices still to be reprogrammed in **Shire**. WFP is scheduled to deploy to Shire on 28 May to finalize this activity.

- UNDSS technicians have completed the installations and reprogramming of radios in **Adama**, as per the UN harmonization project plan.

- UNDSS and UNICEF technicians are currently in **Gambala** implementing the harmonization plan activities. They expect to finalize this location by the end of the week.

- A WFP technician is travelling to **Hawassa** today to carry out harmonization activities, to be finalized by 31 May.

- A UNDSS team will travel to **Dessie** on 1 June to do the same.

3. Election preparedness

- Several meetings have been held at the Cluster and RC level to discuss the election preparedness plan. The Cell is working within a limited pool of options and resources to further enhance security communications and data connectivity services beyond its current plan.

- To improve the reliability of access to Internet connectivity services, the Cell has already submitted a 'whitelist' containing the details of all UN office locations and residences of critical staff which – with approval from the national authorities – will retain access to connectivity services in the case that the services of Ethio Telecom are shut down. The activation of this whitelist is pending.

- Another option for contingency planning is to carry out a mapping exercise of all UN agency locations which has access to connectivity via VSAT. In cases of emergency, UN staff would be able to use the connectivity services of the nearest UN office. Limited VSAT bandwidth would be a constraint in this plan, which would only be used a last resort. To develop this contingency exercise, the Cell can build on the existing UN services map which details all agencies' services across Ethiopia, previously submitted to OCHA as part of its election preparedness planning. The map is currently incomplete.

- The Cell is working with Ethio Telecom to explore all possible connectivity options as part of its election preparedness planning.

- Severe challenges remain with importing equipment, including VSATs for connectivity services. The Cell is attempting to escalate this issue while engaging in election preparedness planning on the assumption that communications equipment being held in customs will not be released before the general election date.
  - *Action point*: Rami Shakra to draft and circulate a note for approval by the Cell which clearly outlines the constraints within which the Cell is working to provide communications services so that expectations can be managed at the senior management level.

4. Initial feedback on call centre management SOP by UNDSS
  - *Action point*: The Cell to provide any feedback on the call centre management SOP circulated by UNDSS.

5. Security communications in Mekelle
  - *Action point*: DaEun Han to set up a separate meeting for technical staff to discuss training of staff in security communications, including the drafting of a UN common radio communications training manual.

AOB
- **Challenge**: The Cell is currently unable to extend security communications services to NGOs/INGOs due to government restrictions.

All information related to the ICT Emergency Cell can be found on the ETC website:

www.etcluster.org/emergency/ethiopia-tigray-region

Minutes: Elizabeth Millership, WFP