

# Central African Republic (CAR) – Conflict

## ETC Situation Report #65 – FINAL

Reporting period: 17/12/2013 to 21/07/2023

The Emergency Telecommunications Cluster (ETC) was re-activated in C.A.R. in December 2013 in response to the conflict crisis. On 21 July 2023, the ETC initiated service transition to its local partners in preparation for closure.

## Highlights

- The ETC was requested to be re-activated in the Central African Republic (CAR) in December 2013 in response to the armed conflict crisis to provide emergency telecommunications support for humanitarian responders.<sup>1</sup>
- By July 2021, the ETC had expanded its internet connectivity and security communications services for humanitarians across 13 sites in CAR—Alindao, Bangassou, Bambari, Bangui, Batangafo, Birao, Bossangoa, Bouar, Bria, Kaga Bandoro, N'Dele, Paoua, and Zemio.
- Responding to the communications needs of displaced communities in CAR and following the recently adopted ETC2020 Strategy, the ETC rolled out services for communities from 2021—Common Feedback Mechanism (CFM), phone booth, and a charging station in Bria, and a Learning Centre and cybercafé in Bangassou.
- During the decade-long ETC response in CAR, the cluster was supported by critical funding and in-kind contributions from Global ETC partners Ericsson Response, the Government of Luxembourg, Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) and NetHope. The cluster also worked closely with local actors including Action Contre la Faim (ACF), Central African Red Cross, Intersos, IOM, the Ministry of Health, OCHA, UNDSS, UNHCR, UNICEF, and WFP to implement services.
- A mission was conducted in July 2023 to oversee the transition, handover, and closure of ETC services in CAR due to a revision of needs and ongoing lack of funding. All activities and services are handed over to local actors.



ETC services for communities were established in Bria in 2021—phone booth services pictured, used by a young woman displaced during the conflict.

Photo: ETC/Elizabeth Millership

<sup>1</sup> Prior to re-activation in 2013, the ETC was active in CAR as part of the implementation of the Cluster Approach introduced in 2007. At this time, there were limited dedicated resources in country.

## Situation Overview

Since 2013, CAR has experienced violent armed conflicts, which sparked an internal displacement crisis, limiting access to basic services and worsening living conditions. A new escalated level of conflict increased in multiple new hotspots across the country by May 2017, resulting in complex humanitarian needs and serious protection risks. In May 2017 alone, more than 100,000 people were displaced and 19,000 sought refuge in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), bringing the total displaced population close to one million—a quarter of the national population.

Although the government of CAR and 14 armed groups signed a peace accord on 06 February 2019, the security situation remained precarious and protests resulted in movement restrictions across the country.

The ongoing conflict led to limited national availability of reliable telecommunications services—a critical service needed by humanitarian responders to assist affected communities.

The ETC was re-activated in CAR in December 2013 in response to the conflict crisis to provide emergency telecommunications support to humanitarian responders on the ground. For 10 years, the ETC provided services across 13 locations. By 21 July 2023, the cluster had implemented an exit strategy and transitioned activities and services to local actors on the ground following protracted funding challenges and a revised need for services.

## Challenges

The volatile security situation in the country since December 2013 remained a challenge for all humanitarians and implementation of ETC services. The Country Minimum Operating Security Standards (C-MOSS) requirements stated that Security Operation Centres (SOCs) needed to function 24/7 in all common operational areas. At the onset of the emergency, lack of secure compounds in some common operational locations prevented the installation of ETC equipment and deployment of services.

Several incidents impacted on ETC services throughout the 10 years of operation, including an escalation of conflict in 2017 which resulted in a lack of access to eight common operational areas, and the evacuation of humanitarian staff in Zemio. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic restricted the movement of humanitarian staff, including the ETC, from 2019 until 2021.

Limited office space and unavailability of staff with telecommunications expertise and VSAT certification also slowed down service delivery at the onset of the response.

Funding constraints remained a critical challenge to the continuation and expansion of ETC services, resulting the transition, handover, and closure of ETC services in July 2023.

## ETC Activities

### Coordination and information management

#### Staffing

Following the re-activation of the cluster, a dedicated ETC Coordinator and Information Management Officer (IMO) were deployed to Bangui on 17 December 2013 in support of the local inter-agency ICT team. An ICT specialist had already deployed on 14 December 2013 to Douala to support the arrival of telecommunications equipment to Bangui.

Over the years, the ETC staffing framework evolved. Although a dedicated ETC Coordinator was in place until May 2018, the IM function was supported remotely by the Global ETC team soon after the initial deployment. Due to a lack of funding for the operation, the ETC Coordinator role was merged with the WFP Head of TEC. An ICT Specialist and ICT Assistant were later recruited to enable ETC services delivery—these roles continued until closure in July 2023.

Several partners deployed personnel through the WFP Stand-by Partnership (SBP) to support the operation with specific tasks and for a dedicated period of time. This includes Ericsson Response, the Government of Luxembourg, and MSB.

An ETC oversight mission was conducted with the WFP Regional Bureau in Dakar (RBD) from 25 September to 09 October 2021 to review operational requirements and 2022 planning. The findings informed the ETC’s submission to the 2022 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) and it was decided to explore funding options to continue ETC service delivery.

However, amid protracted funding challenges and a further revised need for ETC services in CAR, an exit strategy for the ETC operation was implemented in July 2023. A WFP FITTEST specialist was in CAR from 6 to 21 July to oversee the transition and closure of ETC services. Services for the affected population are handed over to local implementing partners across multiple locations.

Following the closure of the ETC in CAR, coordination of the ICT response in country will be carried out by the interagency ICT Working Group.

#### User satisfaction surveys

The ETC in CAR carried out annual user satisfaction surveys to gather feedback from its service users on gaps and improvements to be made. The results are summarized here:

YEAR	USER SATISFACTION SCORE	COMMENTS
2018	93%	Generally high satisfaction rates across the core ETC services.
2019	72%	Severe gaps in funding to provide support staff throughout all locations where the ETC provides services.

2020	85%	Services significantly improved as a result of steps implemented following 2019 survey.
2021	77%	Challenges were raised in the areas of coordination, service maintenance, and upgrades to internet connectivity and security communications services.
2022	80%	Users flagged the need to restore and improve internet connectivity services across the country, and the ETC to improve its responsiveness for technical support and coordination.

### Capacity building

In February 2018, the ETC carried out the first ever ICT4Gov training in Bangui to learn how to better support humanitarian emergencies, deploy shared ICT services, and strengthen collaboration among government and humanitarian actors on the ground. 31 participants from the government, international and national Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), military, and UN agencies participated in this training.

The ETC Let's Comm capacity building course was conducted for 12 participants between 16 to 20 September 2019 to equip UN agencies and NGOs in using security communications systems in CAR, including the skills to design, implement, and maintain VHF and HF radio infrastructure and networks.

## ETC Services

### Internet connectivity

At its peak in 2021, the ETC in CAR delivered internet connectivity services to over 650 users a month from 68 organizations—12 UN agencies and 56 NGOs—across 11 sites.

At the time of service handover in 2023, only OCHA in Batangafo was receiving ETC internet connectivity services provided by the ETC Rapid Response solution, composed of an emergency.lu VSAT terminal and Ericsson Response Wireless LAN in Disaster and Emergency Response (WIDER) technology. OCHA is setting up its own connectivity services in Batangafo in preparation for the decommissioning of the services.

Below is a timeline of ETC internet connectivity service delivery in CAR from 2013 to 2023.

DATE	ACTIVITY
03 December 2013	ETC started providing data connectivity services at the WFP sub-office in Bouar using WFP corporate VSAT solution.
July 2014	Stable and reliable data connectivity was extended and made available for all humanitarian responders in seven operational areas—Bambari, Bossangoa,

	Bouar, Kaga Bandoro, Paoua, N'Dele, and Zemio, hosted by lead agencies in these sites: OCHA, UNHCR, UNICEF, and WFP.
February 2018	Services set up in Bria – internet connectivity now provided in eight sites.
November 2018	Services set up in Alindao at the ACF office – internet connectivity now provided in nine sites.
January 2019	ETC deployed a satellite terminal at IOM offices in Bangassou and satellite equipment in Birao to provide internet connectivity services to humanitarian – internet connectivity now provided in 11 sites.
February 2019	Due to increased humanitarian needs in Batangafo, the ETC set up the ETC rapid response solution composed of the emergency.lu VSAT and Ericsson Response WIDER network solution in the OCHA premises – internet connectivity now provided in 12 sites.
May - June 2020	Solution to record the number of ETC service users installed in all connectivity sites.
Throughout 2021	ETC continued to deliver services across 11 sites in CAR (Zemio decommissioned).
August 2022	ETC unable to raise US\$170,000 required to continue the provision of ETC connectivity services. The services were disconnected in 10 out of 11 sites, with only services in Batangafo remaining thanks to the partners' in-kind contribution. Approximately 34 users in the OCHA-hosted compound.
September - October 2022	Government of Luxembourg sent new equipment to install on the existing VSAT in Batangafo to ensure migration of services to their new platform and guarantee the continuation of services.
December 2022	In coordination with Ericsson Response remotely, a joint ETC/Government of Luxembourg mission took place in CAR to restore connectivity services in Batangafo, which had been down because of power fluctuations, as well as to migrate the services to the new emergency.lu platform to ensure continuity of services.
July 2023	Closure of ETC services in CAR.

### Security communications

In total, the ETC supported 13 UNDSS-managed Security Operations Centres (SOCs) and provided security communications services to strengthen the safety and security of humanitarian responders operating in CAR in Alindao, Bangassou, Bambari, Bangui, Batangafo, Birao, Bossangoa, Bouar, Bria, Kaga Bandoro, N'Dele, Paoua, and Zemio.

Following the closure of ETC security communications services in CAR, all activities are handed over to UNDSS.

Below is a timeline of ETC security communications services in CAR from 2013 to 2023.

DATE	ACTIVITY
December 2013	ETC strengthened the SOC in Bangui by installing a dedicated VHF radio channel for use by humanitarian responders.
January 2014	ETC and UNDSS supported radio programming for all humanitarian organizations operating in Bangui.
February 2014	ETC extended coverage of the radio communications network in Bangui by installing additional repeaters and a back-up solar solution.
March 2014	SOCs established in Bossangoa, Bouar, and Paoua to ensure security communications and improved safety for humanitarian responders.
July 2014	SOCs established in Kaga Bandoro, Paoua, Bambari, N'Délé, and Zemio.
June 2017	To strengthen services, ETC partner NetHope sent an equipment donation to CAR including 50 VHF handheld radios and VHF repeaters.
July 2017	ETC handed over security communications services to UNDSS in Bossangoa and Bouar. ETC continued to focus on implementing the long-term transition plan with leading agencies in operational sites and expanding services in Bangui.
January 2018	Telecommunications Security Standards {TESS+} assessment mission took place to identify security communications needs in CAR. Recommendations issued for 14 sites.
March 2018	WFP FITTEST deployed to CAR to carry out security communications systems upgrades to eight sites recommended by {TESS+}. Capacity building session held in Bangui for UN agencies on how to deploy, configure, and maintain the security communications equipment in country.
May 2018	ETC started the deployment of security communications services in Bria, Alindao, and Bangassou with the support of the Central Emergency Response Funds (CERF).
May 2019	OCHA approved a project proposal submitted by the ETC and allocated US\$300,000 from the Common Humanitarian Fund (CHF) to implement the remaining {TESS+} recommendations.
March 2020	Approximately 60% of {TESS+} recommendations completed. Final implementation of the recommendations for the remaining six sites were restricted due to funding shortfall.
April 2020	Satellite phone equipment was dispatched to 13 SOCs across CAR as part of the {TESS+} recommendation for responders to have access to at least one satellite phone in each location.

Throughout 2021	ETC continued to support humanitarian organizations with VHF/HF handheld and vehicle radio configuration, programming, and technical training of operators. VHF handheld radios were replaced in Kaga Bandoro with new versions to improve services.
July 2022	The ETC continued to offer technical support in maintaining the VHF/HF radio network across all operational sites and humanitarian staff training needs throughout the response, until service transition in July 2023. ETC delivered training sessions on security communications procedures to 17 radio operators from partner NGOs in Bangui.
July 2023	Closure of ETC services in CAR.

### ICT Helpdesk

By July 2014, technical ICT support services were available for all humanitarian responders in the eight operational locations of Bambari, Bangui, Bossangoa, Bouar, Kaga-Bandoro, N'Dele, Paoua, and Zemio. By February 2019, technical ICT support service was available in 11 sites: Alindao, Bambari, Bangui, Batangafo, Bossangoa, Bouar, Bria, Kaga-Bandoro, N'Dele, Paoua and Zemio.

### Services for Communities

ETC services for communities were established in CAR in 2021, following a [needs assessment](#) conducted in January 2019. The ETC interviewed 270 Internally Displaced People (IDP) to identify the information that matters most to communities and to understand if and how they access information, the technological means of communication and information available to communities, and challenges to accessing information.

The assessment team also held focus group discussions with community leaders, community delegates, and randomly selected adult male and female groups in Bangassou, Kaga Bandoro, and Bria.

The survey found that mobile phone ownership remained very low in some locations. Further, charging of mobile devices presented challenges in the face of electricity shortages and poverty. Radio was the most commonly used source of information, although it did not provide all the information that communities needed. In most of the assessed areas, women were found to have much lower rates of accessibility to mobile phones than men.

In May 2019, OCHA approved a project proposal submitted by the ETC and allocated US\$300,000 from the CHF for four services for communities projects—a Learning Centre and Cyber Café in Bangassou, and a Common Feedback Mechanism (CFM) platform, a free-of-charge phone booth service, and charging station services in Bria.

The ETC also received US\$108,000 from the Government of Luxembourg to support the projects in Bria and Bangassou to enable affected communities to access critical information and services.

Read '[Giving a voice to those affected by conflict](#)'.



### **Common Feedback Mechanism (CFM)**

The CFM project—led by UNICEF in its capacity of Accountability for Affected Populations (AAP) group lead—was rolled out in the IDP camp in Bria in September 2021. The CFM enabled affected communities to contact humanitarians to explain their needs and to request assistance. An automated system was integrated into the CFM platform by the ETC to ensure that feedback from communities was reported in a timely manner and assistance provided within a specific timeframe.

The CFM service in Bria was briefly suspended from March to July 2022, following the initial six-month pilot period.

A total of 6,359 cases were registered via the CFM in Bria since it launched in September 2021, up to closure in 2023.

In January 2022, OCHA funded the expansion of ETC CFM services in an additional five locations—Bambari, Batangafo, Bossangoa, Kaga Bandoro, and Paoua.

The CFM service in Bria and expansion to additional locations is handed over to UNICEF. Currently, the service is paused due to lack of funding. The ETC will support the renewal of licenses for the CFM platform, if funding for the service is obtained.

More information on the ETC CFM service is available [here](#).

### **Phone booths**

The ETC and implementing partner—INTEROS—launched the phone booth and charging station services for affected communities in the IDP camp in Bria on 25 September 2021. The phone booths assist people to communicate with their families and to contact humanitarian hotlines free-of-charge.

By December 2021, over 1,200 calls had been made at the facilities. A year later—December 2022—4,580 calls have been made using the ETC phone booth service in Bria since it opened. A total of 7,467 calls have been made using the ETC phone booth service in Bria at closure of service in May 2023.

The ETC phone booth service is handed over to local partner, INTEROS.

Read '[Good call: ETC helps people displaced by conflict stay in touch](#)'.

### **Charging station**

The ETC launched the charging station service for affected communities in the IDP camp in Bria on 25 September 2021. People came to the service to safely and securely charge mobile phones, radio receivers, and flashlights.

In December 2021, approximately 2,370 devices had been charged at the facilities since it was launched. By December 2022, approximately 27,740 devices had been powered up using the charging station. Since the service was launched in September 2021, 35,151 devices had been charged.

The services for communities' facilities for recharging electronic devices in Bria is handed over to INTEROS.



### **Learning Centre and Cyber Café**

The Learning Centre and Cyber Café in Bangassou was launched on 26 January 2023 in a ceremony attended by government, UN, and NGO representatives. On 7 February 2023, the centre conducted the first training activities, with a class of 60 learners. From February to June 2023, the centre trained a total of 280 learners and a cumulative total of 3,610 visitors.

More information on the Learning Centre and Cyber Café is available in a video [here](#).

The centre is handed over to the Central African Red Cross for further implementation of activities. Provision of internet services at the centre were secured until the end of 2023.

### **COVID-19 call centre**

On 24 April 2020, the ETC set up a dedicated COVID-19 call centre in Bangui to assist the government's Ministry of Health in its response efforts to combat misinformation surrounding the pandemic, encourage early detection of the virus, and ultimately improve the safety of communities and the effectiveness of responders. The ETC was allocated US\$100,000 from the OCHA CHF for its response to COVID-19 and US\$7,800 from the UN Reform Critical Corporate Initiative (CCI).

The Ministry of Health had recruited three teams to operate the call centre and moved the centre to new premises. The ETC installed equipment and onboarded three IT specialists to provide support throughout the 24/7 operation of the call centre.

By July 2022, the 24/7 toll-free '1212' COVID-19 helpline, led by the Ministry of Health, had registered a total of 160,567 calls related to: COVID-19 vaccinations; COVID-19 movement pass; COVID-19 alerts; and information on measures to control COVID-19. By December 2022, a total of 230,393 COVID-19 related calls had been registered. At transition of ETC services in July 2023, operators had registered a total of 287,593 COVID-19 related calls.

At the height of the COVID-19 response, the call centre was taking over 3,000 calls a week. Read '[Around-the-clock communication fighting COVID-19](#)'.

The service is now handed over to the Ministry of Health.

### **Sudan Refugee Response**

Thousands of Sudanese crossed the border from Sudan into CAR following the outbreak of conflict in April 2023. The ETC submitted a US\$160,300 funding request to OCHA and UNHCR in May 2023 to support the cross-border humanitarian response in Birao and Am Dafock for six months.

The ETC participated in the Inter Cluster Coordination Group (ICCG) meeting hosted by OCHA on 11 May 2023 to discuss the multi-cluster evaluation of Am Dafock village, which sits on the border with Sudan and was a crossing point for refugees. An inter-agency plan for the provision of shelter and other humanitarian protection services to the refugees was developed through the ICCG.

The ETC joined UNHCR in a technical mission in Birao and Am Dafock village from 26 May to 02 June 2023 to install a VSAT internet connectivity solution to support the activities of humanitarian actors working for the protection of Sudanese refugees.

As a part of the mission, the ETC also installed a Push-to-Talk (PTT) radio base, configured HF and VHF radio equipment, trained UNDSS radio operators and staff, and collected data to contribute to the humanitarian presence map of the crisis zone.

Following the closure of ETC services and a lack of funding for this emergency, the support is foreseen to be continued on a best-effort basis by WFP in CAR.

## Funding

The ETC required an average of US\$1.5 million each year to deliver critical telecommunications and other humanitarian related services. Due to protracted funding challenges, the ETC was, on average, 35% funded each year.

DATE	ACTIVITY
December 2013	At the onset of the emergency, the ETC required US\$1.5 million to fund the immediate response.
May 2014	US\$346,816 received from the Government of Luxembourg and OCHA CHF.
September 2017	CERF funding of US\$530,000 confirmed for three priority sites—Bria, Alindao, and Bangassou—to support the deployment of common ICT services.
October 2018	ETC allocated US\$400,000 from the CHF.
May 2019	OCHA approved two project proposals submitted by the ETC and allocated a total of US\$600,000 from the CHF—US\$300,000 for each project—distributed to the ETC for the services for communities projects and implementation of the {TESS+} recommendations.
February 2020	The ETC received US\$108,000 from the Government of Luxembourg to support three projects in Bria and Bangassou to enable affected communities to access critical information and services. A contribution of US\$7,800 from the UN Reform Critical Corporate Initiative (CCI) was allocated for the establishment of the COVID-19 call centre in Bangui in mid-2020.
August 2021	The ETC received US\$160,000 from the OCHA CHF to provide vital communications services for humanitarians and affected communities. The ETC now had 37 percent funding in 2021 and still required US\$550,000 for the provision of communications services to connect displaced communities with family members and enable humanitarians to deliver assistance.
November 2021	ETC submitted its draft proposal and budget of US\$1.95 million to the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for 2022.

2022	Critical funding of US\$450,000 from OCHA CHF supported the expansion of ETC CFM services in an additional five locations in 2022 – Bambari, Batangafo, Bossangoa, Kaga Bandoro, and Paoua.
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Further information related to ETC CAR operation can be found on the website:  
[www.etcluster.org/emergencies/central-african-republic-conflict](http://www.etcluster.org/emergencies/central-african-republic-conflict)