

Sudan, conflict

ETC Situation Report #13

Reporting period: 01/12/2023 to 31/12/2023

The Emergency Telecommunications Cluster (ETC) was activated on 25 May 2023 to support the humanitarian response following the outbreak of conflict on 15 April. The ETC is led by WFP in Sudan. ETC Situation Reports (SitReps) are produced monthly.

Highlights

- On 12 December the UN Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) extended the mandate of the ETC in Sudan from 31 December, for an additional six months up to 01 July 2024.
- The escalated conflict in Wad Madani on 15 December has resulted in the halting of planned connectivity services scale up in Kassala, Gedaref, Wad Madani and Kosti. The ETC remains optimistic that the conflict will be resolved by January to enable safe provision of planned service needs.
- ETC connectivity services are currently provided in Port Sudan and Kassala. Weekly, an average of approximately 700 unique devices are being registered on the ETC network. In Kosti, the free Wi-Fi hotspot service provided for humanitarian in the WFP office has been temporarily stopped from after fighting escalated to Wad Madani.



The ETC enhances connectivity services in Port Sudan. Photo: WFP/ETC

Situation overview

Fighting between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has continued from mid-April for over eight months. On the 15 December, fighting broke out between the RSF and SAF in Wad Madani and on 18 December, RSF took control of the place displacing over 300,000 people. According to the UNHCR [operational data portal](#), as of 18 December, more than 1.4 million Sudanese have fled across the border into neighbouring countries, and over 7.0 million people have been forcibly displaced since the start of the conflict.

Prior to the outbreak of conflict, a third of the population was already in need of humanitarian assistance. The continued conflict has severely constrained access to food, water, fuel, cash, health care, and safe shelter.

The revised Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) published on 17 May estimates that the number of people in need of assistance is 24.7 million—a 57 per cent increase from before the crisis.

Port Sudan continues to be Sudan's temporary administrative capital, as of 26 August.

Telecommunications infrastructure

Since the outbreak of conflict on 15 April, Sudan's communications infrastructure has been impacted by direct damage to telecommunications towers, and a deteriorated national power grid supply.

All three Mobile Network Operators (MNOs) are gradually restoring voice services in Port Sudan and the service is improving daily in the eastern cities and other locations except in inaccessible locations. Most locations in Sudan still depend on Sudatel, whose services are congested by the high numbers of people using them. Two of the major internet service providers (ISPs) are not fully operational and local VSAT services are unreliable. Communication blackout has been reported in Wad Madani after the RSF took control of the city.

The United Nations Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) maintains a Very High Frequency (VHF) radio network that remains operational in most locations across the country, except El Geneina, Zalingei, Nyala, and El Fasher, which were affected by looting.

The extensive looting of communications assets across the country resulted in a need to rebuild and strengthen common humanitarian information and telecommunications technology infrastructure to enable a rapid and coordinated response to the crisis.

See the Sudan [ICT Profile](#) for more information on national telecommunications infrastructure.

ETC Activities

Coordination

A mission comprising of the WFP TEC Chief Information Officer (CIO) who is also the chairperson of the ETC, the WFP Regional IT Officer (RITO), and the Sudan Head of TEC visited Port Sudan from 10 to 14 December, to provide support for the implementation of ongoing programmes and projects in the Sudan response. The three participated in several internal and external meetings, including those with the three Mobile Network Operators (MNOs)—Zain, MTN, and Sudani—to support the mission.

The ETC continues to work closely with humanitarian partners to ensure ETC common services are deployed in operational locations across the country. On 18 December, the ETC held its ninth ETC Working Group meeting to discuss progress on implementation of activities, partner requests, and challenges. The next ETC Working Group meeting will be held on 15 January.

The National Telecommunications Corporation (NTC)—the government entity responsible for regulation and clearance of telecommunication equipment and services—started operating in Port Sudan from 16 November. The ETC met with the entity regarding the formalities and requirements for importation of telecommunications equipment into the country. The entity lost most of their operational systems and are starting to recover and rebuild them; however, they pledged to expedite all requests. The entity clarified that they would want all UN agencies and humanitarian organisations to apply individually for telecommunications equipment importation clearance. The ETC will continue to follow up on this matter with the entity in early January.

On 12 December, the UN HCT extended the mandate of the ETC in Sudan from 31 December, for another six months, up to 01 July 2024.

Common ETC activities in Port Sudan and Kassala remained normal but the WFP Kosti free Wi-Fi hotspot for humanitarians and the planned scale up in Wad Madani was halted after fighting between RSF and SAF escalated on 15 December. Thousands of displaced people continued to move towards Gedaref and other locations, and humanitarian organisations evacuated their staff from Wad Madani.

Humanitarian partners can request information, technical advice, and connectivity services to the ETC through the Sudan.ETC@wfp.org email address. A ticketing system has been established to manage the high volume of requests being received.

Internet connectivity

ETC connectivity services are currently provided in two common operational areas—Port Sudan and Kassala—and in Kosti the free Wi-Fi hotspot service provided for humanitarians in the WFP office has been temporarily halted due to escalated conflict in Wad Madani.

In Port Sudan, the cluster continue to connectivity in 28 sites, serving 640 active users from 37 partners agencies. In Kassala, the cluster is providing connectivity in four sites, serving approximately 70 users from eight partner agencies.

The planned scale up of connectivity services in Kassala, Gedaref, Wad Madani and Kosti to meet the needs of the response has been halted since 15 December, as fighting between RSF and SAF escalated to Wad Madani. The ETC remains optimistic that this shortcoming will be resolved in January 2024 and scale up of services in Kassala, Gedaref, Wad Madani, and Kosti will proceed as planned.

The procurement process for an undersea fibre optic cable is ongoing. The cable will facilitate back-up connectivity services through a national telecommunications provider.

Security communications

Discussion is ongoing between the ETC and the new UNDSS management to establish a new security communications system plan for Sudan. UNDSS proposed some innovative ideas and how to repurpose the role of the Security Operations Centres (SOCs) in the country.

Difficulty in obtaining government clearance for the importation of security communications equipment including radios and repeaters remains one of the key challenges. The procedure for the importation of telecommunications equipment remains unclear to humanitarian partners. Less than 50 handheld radios remain in Sudan for the use of all UN agencies. The

ETC and UNDSS continues to manage a 'radio pool' for humanitarians to collect and return for each critical mission.

Four UNDSS-managed SOCs in Port Sudan, Kassala, Gedaref, and Kosti are operational and reachable by those with handheld radios. The ETC is developing a strategy to promote awareness among UN agencies of the need for radio checks to increase the SOC check-in response rates, including by using mobile phones due to the lack of available radios.

Currently, the security communications services (SCS) in Port Sudan, Kassala, Kosti, Damazine, El Fasher, El Fula, El Obeid, Ed Daein, Kadugli, and Zalingei are functional, connected to, and monitored from the Remote Security Operations centre (RSOC) in Nairobi.

Services for communities

The ETC is exploring the possibility of establishing platforms to access information for communication between humanitarians and the affected population, such as a Chatbot or an inter-agency Common Feedback Mechanism (CFM), given the serious deterioration of the communications infrastructure across the country. A CFM taskforce has been established by UNOCHA with participation from UNICEF, WFP, and UNHCR.

In collaboration with IOM, the ETC plans to establish a services for communities' project in Wadi Halfa in north Sudan near the border with Egypt after completion of the ongoing establishment of IOM office there. IOM is expecting the power generator and other equipment to be deployed in Wadi Halfa by the end of December or beginning of 2024. Once IOM sets up the office, they will inform the ETC to start the processes in Wadi Halfa accordingly.

Funding

The ETC requires US\$6.3 million to deliver services in up to 10 common operational areas, including data connectivity, ICT helpdesk support, security communications services (radio programming and training), and platforms for the affected population to receive information and provide feedback to humanitarians.

The ETC secured 68% of its 2023 funding needs. Contributions received include EUR 250,000 (US\$273,434) from the Government of Luxembourg, US\$2 million from the US Bureau for Humanitarian Affairs (BHA), and US\$2 million from the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF). Although the cluster is partially funded, additional funding is required to continue to maintain and expand the common services.

Challenges

Lack of equipment is a major challenge for the operation, following the looting of pre-existing telecommunications assets.

Difficulties in obtaining customs authorization, especially for satellite and radio equipment, has resulted in a lack of critical equipment on the ground, thereby constraining operations.

Travel and access are severely constrained across the country due to the security situation.

Difficulties in obtaining visas for travel to Sudan continues to restrict the ability of the ETC to mobilize the required staff to deploy critical communications services for the humanitarian community.

Dashboard

The latest ETC Dashboard for the Sudan operations is available [here](#).

Meetings

The next Global ETC Partners Teleconference on the Sudan crisis will take place on **Tuesday 09 January at 15:00 EAT**.

The next Local ETC Working Group meeting will take place online on **Monday 15 January at 15:00 EAT**.

Contacts

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Further information related to ETC operations can be found on the website:

www.etcluster.org/emergency/sudan-conflict

For more information or to be added or deleted from the mailing list please contact:

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