Ukraine – conflict

ETC Situation Report #20
Reporting period: 01/02/2023 to 28/02/2023

The Emergency Telecommunications Cluster (ETC) was activated in Ukraine on 3 March 2022 following the escalation of armed conflict between Ukraine and the Russian Federation. ETC SitReps are distributed every month.

Highlights

- On 17 February, the ETC successfully completed the setup of the Remote Security and Information Operations Centre (RSIOC) system with support from a telecommunications specialist from WFP's interagency telecommunications security standards body, {TESS+}. The RSIOC system allows UNDSS security officers based in Mukachevo to monitor the radio networks in Dnipro, Kyiv and Odesa and communicate with UN staff in the field.

- The ETC conducted an assessment of the inter-agency radio programming needs in the country. In response to increased demand for ETC support, a ticketing system has been created for inter-agency services requests, which can be channeled through the ukraine.etcservicedesk@wfp.org email address.

An ETC telecommunications specialist tests the RSIOC system at the main UNDSS SIOC in Mukachevo.

Photo: WFP/ETC

- In cooperation with Clear Global, the organization providing translation and content revision for the ETC Chatbot, the ETC organized a 'plain language' training for members of the Accountability to Affected Populations Working Group and other interagency staff. The two-day training provided practical materials and resources to assist staff in communicating clearly with the affected population in the Ukrainian language.

Overview

The estimated toll of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine surpassed 18,955 civilian casualties, including 7,199 deaths as of 13 February 2023, according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) reports that 5.4 million people are internally displaced in Ukraine due to the conflict as of 23 January 2023, and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) puts the total number of Ukrainian refugees recorded across Europe at over 8 million as of 21 February 2023.

Impact on telecommunications

The continued attacks on national infrastructure across Ukraine have led to significant damage to national telecommunications infrastructure, resulting in severe communications blackouts across the country. In many cases, disruption to electrical power supplies supporting telecommunications equipment has resulted in service failures, including of ETC services.

Several reports have been received of severe disruptions to satellite telephony services in areas close to the frontlines. The ETC is exploring solutions to provide responders deploying on frontline missions with a hybrid of services and equipment.

Activities

Coordination

The ETC has introduced a ticketing system for inter-agency service requests to manage the increased volume of requests for support it has been receiving. The ticketing system will help to ensure that service requests are properly assigned to personnel and the progress can be tracked. All requests for ETC services such as radio programming, satellite communications support, training, and other services can be directed to ukraine.etcservicedesk@wfp.org with Ukraine.etc@wfp.org in copy.

The ETC is mobilizing its personnel in the field offices to provide more emergency telecommunications support to the frontlines in the ongoing humanitarian response in the eastern and southern Ukraine.

Security communications

The ETC in Ukraine is continuing its efforts to reinforce, expand, and interconnect the VHF networks it has deployed in Dnipro, Kyiv and Odesa. VHF radio serves as a secure means for humanitarians to communicate in case of outages in mobile network coverage or satellite phone services.

The existing network, which is available to all UN staff in-country, was successfully linked to UNDSS' main Security Information Operations Centre (SIOC) in Mukachevo on 17 February through the deployment of a Remote SIOC system (RSIOC). The RSIOC setup included the installation of a VHF base station that allows UNDSS security officers based in Mukachevo to monitor the radio networks in Dnipro, Kyiv and Odesa and communicate with UN staff conducting field missions in those areas. Starlink and BGAN satellite connectivity devices were deployed in conjunction with the RSIOC to ensure failover transmission in case of any disruption to the network.

The setup and installation of the RSIOC was supported by a telecommunications specialist from WFP's interagency telecommunications security standards body, {TESS+}, who deployed to Ukraine from 1 to 21 February. During his mission, the specialist delivered training to all SIOC radio operators, the Head of the SIOC and 25 other staff including security officers from various UN agencies on how to communicate over the interconnected VHF network.

The ETC conducted an assessment of UN agencies' needs for support in programming their radios to the frequencies assigned by the Government of Ukraine to the ETC VHF network. The assessment, which was conducted on 22 February, identified approximately 174 VHF radios in country in need of programming and reprogramming. Further, the agencies who participated in the assessment are in the process of importing an additional 136 mobile and 1,558 handheld VHF radios.

The ETC has offered radio programming support to all of the agencies who participated in the assessment. The ETC is planning to provide additional training to WFP IT staff in all of the ETC's field locations in order to support with this task.

In February, the ETC programmed and reprogrammed 43 VHF radios for UNDP and OHCHR in various locations in Ukraine, and is working on a requests from WHO, UNFPA, World Bank, IOM and OHCHR to programme a further 165 radios. Requests for radio programming services can be directed through the new ukraine.etcservicedesk@wfp.org email address and ticketing system.

The ETC is continuing to engage with the Ukraine Broadcasting, Radiocommunications & Television (BRT) Concern to leverage of their existing broadcasting towers to boost the coverage of the ETC VHF network across the country where UN agencies are present and in areas where humanitarians conduct field missions.

The cluster has received approval from the Dnipro and Mukachevo branches of BRT to use towers in those locations and confirmed the exact positions where the ETC repeaters can be installed on the towers. The team is also seeking the cooperation of BRT in Lviv and other locations where the cluster aims to extend the ETC network.

A new VHF frequency license application will be submitted to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which will cover the new repeater sites, locations for the expansion of the VHF network, and the authorization for NGOs to use the network in addition to UN agency staff.

Secure data connectivity

The ETC is supporting internet connectivity services in the inter-agency hubs in Dnipro and Odesa and in the UNDSS back-up SIOC in Lviv. The ETC data connectivity network is secured with a cyber-security setup provided by ETC partner Cisco Crisis Response. Since the launch of the services, 304 users from 14 agencies have registered on the network.

The ETC is deploying Starlink satellite terminals to provide back-up connectivity in case of ISP and Mobile Network Operator (MNO) outages. A Starlink VSAT was installed at the inter-agency hub in Odesa on 9 February, and another Starlink terminal was installed at the UNDSS' premises in Dnipro on 21 February to provide back-up connectivity for the ETC internet services at the common hub.

In an effort to increase the usage of the ETC data connectivity network, the ETC Information Management Officer (IMO) undertook a mission to Odesa from 8–10 February to gather feedback from users in the interagency office. As a result the ETC, with the support of WFP regional staff and partner Cisco Crisis Response, adjusted the authentication rule for ETC connectivity in Odesa simplify the login protocol for users.

Services for Communities

In cooperation with Clear Global, the organization providing translation and content revision for the ETC Chatbot, the ETC organized a 'plain language' training for members of the Accountability to Affected Populations Working Group and other interagency staff. The two-day training provided practical materials and resources to assist staff in communicating clearly with the affected population in the Ukrainian language. 38 participants from UN agencies and NGOs were selected out of 240 applications received to participate in the training, which was held on 16 and 21 February. Feedback provided by participants in the post-training survey indicated that the large majority found that the training was useful and relevant to their work.

Clear Global is also working on implementing changes to improve the performance of the ETC Chatbot, (known in Ukraine as vBezpetsi, meaning safe spaces). The changes, which are based on the recommendations from ETC Chatbot experts, will include the use of plain language for Chatbot content among other improvements. These changes are expected to be completed by 31 March.

A total of 18,249 users have accessed information relating to humanitarian assistance through the ETC Chatbot since its launch. As of 23 February, users of the ETC Chatbot most frequently used the service to access information on humanitarian aid (73%), hotlines and referral methods (16%), human rights (6%), and other useful information (5%). When seeking information on humanitarian aid, users most frequently consulted categories related to general cash assistance and to WFP assistance.

The ETC is continuing to engage with local government authorities on its plan to support the establishment of an inter-regional call centre, linking existing government support hotlines.

Dashboard

See the ETC Dashboard for an overview of service locations.

Funding

The ETC in Ukraine is 100% percent funded out of the required US$1.4 million.

Challenges

Security issues in the newly accessible locations in eastern Ukraine are a major constraint in the ETC's ability to implement telecommunications solutions in eastern Ukraine.

The risk of cyber-attacks in Ukraine is considered high.

Meetings

The next Global ETC Partners Teleconference on the Ukraine response will take place on **30 March 2023**.

Contacts

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www.etcluster.org/emergency/ukraine-conflict

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