Inter-agency Emergency ICT Sector response in the Tigray region of Ethiopia

Situation Report #3
Reporting period 01/05/2021 to 31/05/2021

The ICT Emergency Cell – launched in February 2021 – leads the interagency emergency ICT sectoral response in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. Situation Reports will be distributed in line with the evolving situation on the ground.

Highlights

- The Emergency Telecommunications Cluster (ETC) in Ethiopia – led by WFP – was formally activated on Friday 28 May to support the humanitarian response in Tigray.

- The ETC has submitted a CERF funding request of US$500,000 to ensure the team can provide dedicated support and resources for the planned activities currently supported by the ICT Emergency Cell.

- The ICT Emergency Cell is following up on the roll out of the UN harmonization project across the Tigray region – including in Mekelle and Shire – to ensure telecommunications infrastructure used by UN agencies is optimized for use by staff.

WFP/ETC delivers radio training to UN drivers in Mekelle.
Photo: Elizabeth Millership/WFP

Situation Overview

Humanitarian access in Tigray remains extremely fluid and volatile. While some areas are accessible, others remain hard to reach due to movement restrictions and ongoing conflict. In the areas accessed, the humanitarian situation is observed to be dire.

Several partners have reported shortages of fuel throughout the region, including in Mekelle, severely affecting humanitarian movement and operations.

While humanitarian partners are scaling up the response, the humanitarian needs continue to be grave, urgent, and exceeding current capacities due to a combination of insecurity, access constraints, and lack of funding. Unpredictable – and in some places, complete blackout – of communications is further hindering humanitarian operations and the flow of information about the humanitarian situation.

ICT Emergency Cell Activities

Coordination

- The Emergency Telecommunications Cluster (ETC) in Ethiopia – led by WFP – was formally activated on Friday 28 May to support the humanitarian response in Tigray, following a request from the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC).

- The ETC has submitted a CERF funding request of US$500,000 to provide dedicated support and resources for the planned activities currently supported by the ICT Emergency Cell.

- The ETC will provide ICT coordination and Information Management (IM) services in the Tigray region with a focus on strengthening staff capacity, security communications services, and assessing options for humanitarian organizations to access Internet connectivity services.

- The ETC operational plan to provide communications services in three locations in Tigray – Mekelle, Shire and Embamadre – may be revised and expanded depending on the humanitarian scale-up in the region.

- A WFP ICT Coordinator – now ETC Coordinator – and an Information Management Officer (IMO) have been on the ground in Mekelle since 11 May to support and strengthen the activities carried out by the inter-agency ICT Emergency Cell, which has been leading the ICT response in Tigray since February.

- As part of the additional scale-up, a telecommunications specialist from the Fast IT and Telecommunications Emergency and Support Team (FITTEST) arrived in Mekelle on 28 May to support the response.

Security communications

- Provision and enhancement of security communications services remains a high priority due to the volatile security situation in the Tigray region and the increasing number of humanitarian responders supporting the operation.

- There are two Security Operation Centres (SOCs) operating in the Tigray region – Mekelle and Shire – to support the safety and security of staff. The Cell continues to optimize security communications services in both SOCs. The ETC is supporting UNDSS to recruit an additional six SOC operators to provide 24/7 operational hours. The security communications services provided by the SOC are available to UN personnel.

- The ETC and members of the Cell in Tigray supported the UNDSS-led UN harmonization project to streamline and optimize security communications infrastructure in country-wide UN offices and vehicles. From 17-27 May, the team reprogrammed all UN agency HF/VHF radios in Mekelle and initiated a radio training programme for WFP drivers and Local Security Assistants (LSAs) to update them on radio protocol and convoy procedures. The team deployed to Shire on 28 May to continue these activities.

- The radio training carried out in Mekelle and Shire is the first phase of the training programme. Once completed, the training will be offered at the inter-agency level, to be supported by a specialist on the ground.

- On 22 May, WFP/ETC tested the coverage of the VHF radio network in Mekelle and found that most sites were adequately covered within an approximate radius of 3-4 kilometres for handheld radios and up to 6-8 kilometres from UN vehicle radios. The same exercise is being carried out in Shire where network coverage gaps have been reported.

- There is a need to develop procedures and deliver training to staff on using the HF and VHF radio channels. The Cell is planning to draft and distribute a handbook for humanitarian staff which outlines how to use VHF radio services and contact the SOCs. The handbook will be shared via the office of the Resident Coordinator (RC) to ensure staff are aware of and familiar with the procedures.

- As part of election preparedness planning, UNDSS has secured the emergency short code '7733' which UN staff and their dependents can call for emergency assistance. UNDSS operators at the SOCs will refer callers to the correct agency, depending on the emergency.

- NGOs/INGOs are also scaling up their operations and have requested support for security communications services. As the Cell is working within strict national guidelines, the need to extend security communications services to NGOs/INGOs has been raised at the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) level.

Internet connectivity

- Access to Internet connectivity services for humanitarian organizations is restricted across multiple locations in Tigray, including in Mekelle. Major challenges to service expansion include restrictions on the importation of communications equipment and operating within guidelines provided by the Ethiopian Communications Authority (ECA). The Cell continues to explore solutions using available options and resources, including discussions with national Internet service provider, Ethio Telecom, to provide Internet connectivity services for the response community as part of its election preparedness planning.

Funding

- WFP has submitted a CERF funding request of US$500,000 to provide ICT coordination and services for three months in support of the humanitarian response plan for Tigray. This will ensure the team can provide dedicated support and resources for the planned activities currently supported by the ICT Emergency Cell.

Challenges

- Frequent power cuts across the Tigray region are impacting on the delivery of ICT services.
- Lengthy approval processes to import and operate communications equipment is a challenge.
- The security situation in Tigray remains volatile, impacting on access to the region or certain locations.
- There is an increasing number of humanitarian staff travelling to the Tigray region as part of the response scale-up. Most of these staff – including UN drivers – require radio training.

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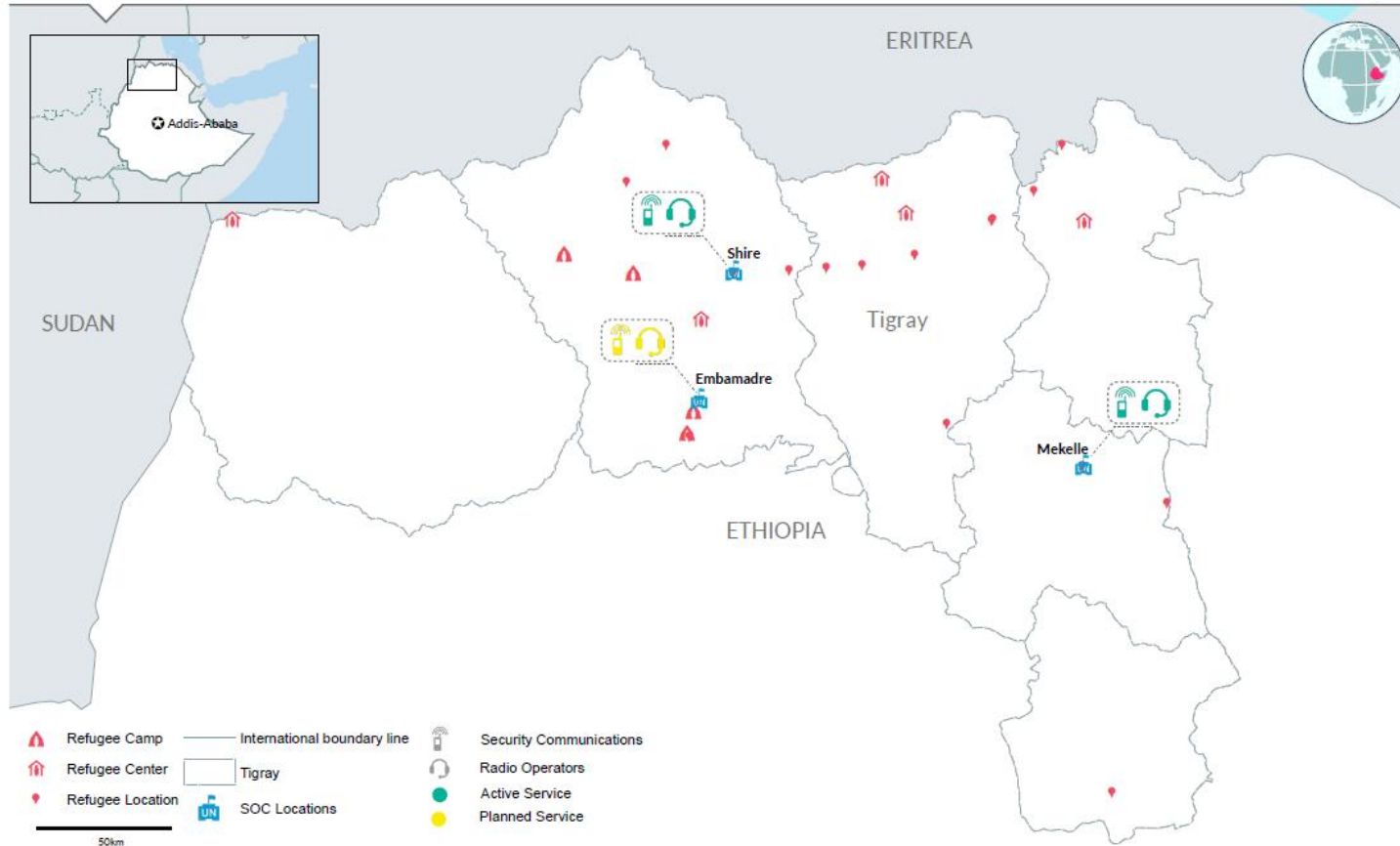
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Interagency Emergency ICT Sector Response Map

TIGRAY/ETHIOPIA
Interagency Emergency ICT Sector Response Map
as of 31 May 2021

ERITREA

Addis-Ababa

SUDAN

Shire

Embamadre

Tigray

Mekelle

ETHIOPIA

	Legend		
⚠ Refugee Camp	International boundary line	📱 Security Communications	
🏠 Refugee Center	Tigray	🎧 Radio Operators	
📍 Refugee Location	SOC Locations	🟢 Active Service	
50km		🟡 Planned Service	

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

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The ICT emergency cell is a network of UN agencies that work together to provide shared communications services in the Tigray region of Ethiopia