Sudan, conflict

ETC Situation Report #2
Reporting period: 27/05/2023 to 02/06/2023

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

Highlights

- Following ETC activation, WFP's TEC team in Sudan has been continuing its efforts to extend internet connectivity to humanitarian actors in Port Sudan. Two point-to-point links were established connecting UNDSS and UNITAMS offices to reliable satellite connectivity services.

- A mobile satellite connectivity kit was integrated with WFP's VSAT to provide additional bandwidth for inter-agency data services, which are now being provided to over 140 humanitarians in four sites across Port Sudan.

- The ETC team is continuing to conduct technical assessments of UN and I/NGO premises in Port Sudan in support of plans to add more sites to the inter-agency connectivity network.

A WFP IT specialist integrates a mobile satellite connectivity kit to the inter-agency data network in Port Sudan.

Photo: WFP

Situation overview

Conflict

Fighting between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has killed hundreds, forced more than 370,000 to flee across borders, and displaced over 1,200,000 people internally since the start of the conflict according to the UNHCR's operational data portal.

Prior to the recent outbreak of violence, a third of the population was already in need of humanitarian assistance. Since then, the conflict has dramatically constrained access to food, water, fuel, cash and health care.

In the revised Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) it is now estimated that the number of people in need of assistance is 24.7 million – a 57 per cent increase from before the crisis.

Telecommunications infrastructure

Since the outbreak of conflict on 15 April, Sudan's communications infrastructure has been heavily impacted as a result of direct damage to telecommunications towers, as well as indirectly through the rapid deterioration of the national power grid.

Two of the country's three Mobile Network Operators (MNOs) are no longer operational. Congestion on the one remaining MNO network is worsened by the concentration of internally displaced people (IDPs) in safer areas away from the active fighting.

UNDSS maintains a VHF radio network that remains operational in most locations across the country, with the exception of El Geneina and Nyala, which were affected by looting.

The extensive looting of communications assets across the country means that there is a clear need to rebuild and strengthen common information and telecommunication technology infrastructure to enable a swift and coordinated response to the crisis.

See the Sudan ICT Profile for more information on national telecommunications infrastructure.

ETC Activities

Coordination

The first Emergency Telecommunications Cluster (ETC) working group, which will take over from the pre-existing inter-agency ICT Working Group, has been scheduled to take place on 5 June. The ETC working group will bring together ICT focal points from I/NGOs and UN agencies present in Sudan to discuss the IT and communications needs on the ground.

The ETC is also engaging with the authorities to obtain clearance for the importation of telecommunications equipment to meet the needs of the response.

Internet connectivity

WFP, as the lead agency of the ETC, has been sharing connectivity with humanitarians in Port Sudan throughout the crisis. Following the activation of the ETC, the cluster is taking over the provision of data connectivity services to the humanitarian community in Sudan.

On 28 May, the ETC established a point-to-point link connecting the UNDSS office in Port Sudan with WFP's satellite infrastructure. Another link was established to provide connectivity to the United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Misison (UNITAMS) office on 31 May.

Connectivity is now being shared in four different sites in Port Sudan, including at the WFP office and a hotel being used as a shared humanitarian workspace. Approximately 140 users from eight UN agencies and I/NGOs are using the shared connectivity services in Port Sudan.

The ETC team is continuing to receive requests for connectivity support and is conducting technical assessments of UN and I/NGO premises in Port Sudan. On 01 June, the team assessed the Sudanese Red Crescent and UNICEF premises. Planning is underway for the establishment of additional point-to-point links with the IOM office and the UNICEF office, which is shared by staff from UNDP, UNDSS, UNFPA, and IOM.

The ETC plans to extend connectivity services to a total of 10 common operational locations across the country.

Security communications

The ETC participated in a meeting of the Security Cell in Port Sudan on 31 May to present its role and the services and support it can offer in terms of security communications systems.

The ETC has been engaging with UNDSS on plans to further enhance the resilience of the security communications infrastructure in the country.

Sudan's humanitarian radio network is being monitored remotely from Nairobi, where the Remote Security Operations Centre (RSOC) solution was transferred after the Khartoum SOC was evacuated. The RSOC was handed over to UNDSS after it was set up in a collaborative effort between WFP's Fast IT and Telecommunications Emergencies and Support Team (FITTEST), Telecommunications Security Standards {TESS+}, and WFP's regional and country TEC teams. The RSOC is connected to Port Sudan, Kassala, Damazine, Kosti, El Obeid, El Fula, El Fasher, Ed Daein, Zalingei, and Kadugli. The VHF network in Khartoum is operational but is not monitored or connected to the RSOC.

Services for communities

The ETC is exploring the needs to establish platforms to access information or for communication between humanitarians and the affected population, such as a Chatbot or an inter-agency Common Feedback Mechanism (CFM). The ETC has deployed Chatbots in other emergencies as a means for hummanitarians to disseminate information to the affected population about their rights and aid and services available to them.

A CFM would provide a channel for two-way communication between the affected community and humanitarian organisations, empowering them to register their feedback and complaints. The information received through a CFM can also enhance decision-making by putting affected communities and their needs and preferences at the centre of the humanitarian response.

Funding

The total requirement for ETC operations in Sudan is US$6.3 million to deliver services in up to 10 common operational areas, including data connectivity and 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 has yet to receive any donor contributions towards its requirements. WFP provided the cluster with an advance to initiate the provision of critical services until funding is secured.

Challenges

Difficulties importing telecommunications equipment, compounded with the looting of pre-existing telecommunications assets in-country has meant that a lack of equipment is a major challenge for the operation.

As a result of the security situation, travel and access is severely constrained across the country.

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

https://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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