Ukraine – conflict
ETC Situation Report #31
Reporting period: 01/01/2024 to 31/01/2024

The Emergency Telecommunications Cluster (ETC) was activated in Ukraine on 03 March 2022 following the escalation of armed conflict between Ukraine and the Russian Federation. ETC SitReps are distributed monthly.

Highlights

- A milestone agreement was reached on 25 January with the authorities in the heavily impacted town of Novyi Buh in Mykolaiv, southern Ukraine, to provide ETC internet services in eight community institutions, including kindergartens, schools, and medical centres as part of a framework to improve the socio-economic situation in the conflict zone.

The ETC coordinator visits the 'Invincibility points' project in the town of Novyi Buh on 25 January. Photo: WFP/ETC

- Following the VHF radio network expansion to five sites implemented from October to December 2023, the ETC is now working on a further extension of the network to an additional eight sites—Kehychivka, Kropyvnytskyi, Mykolaiv, Orly, Pokrovsk, Poltava, Sumy, and Zaporizhzhia.

- Since December 2023, all five humanitarian truck convoy missions going to the frontline to deliver aid have been equipped with the ETC Remote Site on Vehicle (RSoV) solution to ensure responders have access to security communications with the UNDSS-managed Security Information Operations Centre (SIOC).

Overview

The situation in Ukraine continues to worsen, marked by persistent airstrikes and ground fighting causing extensive devastation to lives, livelihoods, civilian infrastructure, and resulting in a substantial increase in humanitarian needs.

Since the commencement of the large-scale attack on Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the toll has exceeded 29,107 civilian casualties. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) the number of civilian casualties in December rose 26.5 percent compared with November due to intensified attacks. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) reports that approximately 3.7 million people have become internally displaced in Ukraine due to the conflict as of 25 September. Additionally, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that the global count of Ukrainian refugees has surpassed 6.3 million as of 19 December.

Impact on telecommunications

On 13 December, a cyberattack targeting one of Ukraine's largest mobile operators resulted in millions of people losing access to mobile network. The mobile operator announced on 19 December that 99% of services had been restored.

Continuing reports highlight significant disturbances to mobile and satellite telephony services in regions close to the frontlines.

Amid the escalating conflict, cyberattacks persist with varying impacts, affecting service availability in some cases, and targeting the unauthorized release of data in others.

ETC Activities

Coordination

The Ukraine Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP) and Regional Refugee Response Plan for Ukraine for 2024 were launched on 15 January. In the HNRP, the ETC renews its commitment to provide support and common services to the humanitarian community as they work to deliver critical assistance (see pages 58-59).

On 05 January, the cluster met with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Ukraine, organized by the International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO). The ETC shared ongoing cluster activities with the group and offered technical support and telecommunications expertise. Further, INSO plans to collect information from the NGOs to extend security communications services to them, with ETC support. The cluster has so far supported security communications services for UN agencies only.

Security communications (radio)

VHF radio network

The ETC continues to extend the coverage of the VHF radio network in partnership with the Ukrainian Broadcasting, Radiocommunications & Television Concern (BRT). The expansion aims to enhance and provide security communications services in areas closer to frontlines.

Following the VHF radio network expansion to five sites[1] implemented from October to December 2023, the ETC is now working on a further extension of the network to an additional eight sites—Kehychivka, Kropyvnytskyi, Mykolaiv, Orly, Pokrovsk, Poltava, Sumy, and Zaporizhzhia. The request for a technical assessment was sent to BRT on 15 January. The ETC will support the technical assessments at each site and agreed with BRT on the deployment phase and timelines for the eight sites.

The VHF radio network in Lviv was enhanced on 04 January, when the ETC replaced the duplexer equipment in the repeater. A thorough check of the VHF radio coverage around Lviv city took place on 18 January, including at the offices of OCHA, FAO, UNFPA, UNDP, and UNDSS.

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[1] Kyiv, Luch, Kharkiv, Dnipro, and Lviv

Security Information and Operations Centre (SIOC)

The ETC plans to support UNDSS to relocate the back-up Remote Security Operations Centre (RSOC) to their new office in Lviv.

Radio programming

The ETC continues its large-scale radio re-programming exercise for UN agencies in line with the new additional frequencies issued in July 2023. To date, 99% (1712 out of 1723) of handheld radios and 97% (224 out of 240) of vehicle radios required in the plan have been reprogrammed.

Following the near completion of the re-programming exercise, the cluster will now focus on programming requests received from UN agencies for newly acquired radios.

Radio programming activities conducted in January is as follows:

- Dnipro: Six VHF handheld radios and one mobile radio for UNDSS, three handheld radios for UNDP, seven handheld radios for WHO, four VHF mobile and nine handheld radios and the installation of four mobile radios in armored vehicles for the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), four VHF mobile radios for the Logistics Cluster and antennas adjusted;
- Lviv: Five handheld radios programmed for UNDSS and four VHF handhelds for WFP;
- Odesa: Two mobile radios on WFP trucks;
- Kyiv: 40 VHF handheld radios and nine mobile radios for UN Women, UNDP, WHO, WFP, UNHCR, and UNOPS.

ETC radio programming services can be requested through a ticketing system via email: ukraine.etcservicedesk@wfp.org.

Remote Site on Vehicle (RSoV) project

The ETC continues to deploy the RSoV project—a pilot mobile VHF radio solution that offers secure communications in UN armoured vehicles operating in high-risk areas.

There are currently five operational RSoV kits prepositioned in Dnipro, Kyiv, and Odesa. Since December 2023, all five humanitarian convoy missions going to the frontline to deliver aid using trucks have been equipped with the RSoV solution to ensure responders have access to security communications with the UNDSS-managed SIOC.

As of 18 January, ETC has provided two further dedicated RSoV kits to equip trucks in Dnipro and Odesa.

The Logistics Cluster and the ETC have agreed on a protocol for dedicated RSoV kits to be integrated into all interagency convoy missions with trucks travelling to the frontlines.

Capacity building

On 11 January, the ETC delivered security communications and basic RSoV training in Dnipro for 16 OCHA staff.

On 25 January, the ETC delivered a radio training session for six WFP staff in Lviv.

The cluster supported UN FAO with a radio induction presentation during the UNDSS-led Safe and Secure Approaches in Field Environments (SSAFE) training in Kyiv on 30 January.

Secure data connectivity

The ETC continues to support data connectivity services in the inter-agency hubs in Odesa, Kharkiv, and Lviv. 80 humanitarians used ETC internet connectivity services in these hubs in January.

The ETC remains committed to safeguarding its connectivity services and employs advanced firewall protection implemented in collaboration with partner Cisco.

Services for communities

'Invincibility Points' project

A milestone agreement was reached on 25 January with the authorities in the heavily impacted town of Novyi Buh in Mykolaiv, southern Ukraine, to provide ETC internet services in eight community institutions, including kindergartens, schools, and medical centres as part of a framework to improve the socio-economic situation in the conflict zone.

The new internet services in Novyi Buh were operational as of early January for an initial six-month pilot phase.

The ETC plans to expand the pilot project to the entire territory of the Mykolaiv region.

Needs assessment

The ETC—supported by OCHA and the relevant local authorities—is conducting an ICT needs assessment for the affected populations in the eastern regions of Ukraine. In January, the ETC met with state administrative stakeholders from Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kharkiv regions to gather information to inform the assessment.

Inter-agency chatbot

The humanitarian Cash Working Group (CWG) requested ETC to support the development of a Chatbot as a communication tool with affected communities in Ukraine to enhance information dissemination about Humanitarian Multipurpose Cash Assistance (MPCA). The ETC and the CWG agreed on the general concept note of the chatbot and the implementation plan of the project.

The procurement process for the development of the Inter-Agency Chatbot for the CWG is ongoing.

Dashboard

See the ETC Dashboard for an overview of service locations.

Funding

In 2024, the ETC in Ukraine has a budget requirement of US$1.5 million to continue to deliver vital communications services. At the start of 2024, the ETC is 73% funded out of this total – with US$ 1.1 million balance of available funds from 2023.

Funds received by the ETC in 2023 were carried over to complete critical projects, including US$921,000 received in May 2023 from the Government of Japan and a US$500,000 in-kind equipment donation received in December 2023 from Cisco Crisis Response to secure the VHF radio backbone network in Ukraine.

Challenges

The security issues in recently opened areas in eastern Ukraine are impeding the deployment of telecommunications solutions.

The risk of cyber-attacks is considered high in the region.

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