

Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh – Refugee Crisis

ETS Situation Report #61 - FINAL

Reporting period: 01/08/2017 to 29/02/2024

The Emergency Telecommunications Sector (ETS) was activated¹ in Bangladesh in August 2017 in response to the Rohingya refugee crisis. In February 2024, the ETS completed its transition to local partners.

Highlights

- The ETS was mobilized in August 2017 to address the urgent need for telecommunications support amid the Rohingya refugee crisis. Over its seven-year response period, the ETS established reliable internet connectivity and security communications systems across Cox's Bazar, Ukhiya, and Teknaf. This ensured vital support for humanitarian operations, directly benefiting 790 humanitarian workers from 21 organizations, and connecting 102 sites to basic services such as healthcare, WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene), nutrition, and emergency food distribution.
- The ETS played a crucial role in reinforcing the safety and security of humanitarian operations through robust security communications systems and training. The implementation of enhanced VHF radio networks and specialized emergency telecommunications training empowered 921 humanitarians monthly, ensuring effective and secure coordination of humanitarian activities.
- The strategic relocation of the core data connectivity network to Cox's Bazar and the planned transition to digital VHF radio systems mark significant operational milestones. These initiatives improve operational efficiency, reliability of telecommunications services, and enhanced security communications.
- In collaboration with the Communicating with Communities (CwC) Working Group, the ETS introduced innovative solutions, such as the setup of CwC centres in 2018 and the ETC CONNECT mobile app in 2017. These initiatives empowered the refugee community by providing them with access to vital information and communication channels.
- By February 2024, the ETS had implemented the exit strategy initiated in July 2023 and handed over its services to local partners.



The ETS installed data connectivity services at a total of 102 sites during its operation from 2017 to 2024.
Photo: WFP/Bijoy Barua

Situation Overview

Since August 2017, Bangladesh has been at the forefront of a humanitarian emergency due to the influx of Rohingya refugees fleeing violence in Myanmar. Due to this crisis, Cox's Bazar became host to

¹ The ETS was not formally activated by the Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) but followed the local coordination structure in place.

one of the world's largest refugee camps, where nearly a million displaced persons sought refuge by early 2018. The sudden and massive displacement left these communities in a state of extreme vulnerability due to an acute shortage of vital services and health risks, in addition to the threat of natural disasters. The situation also placed severe pressure on local infrastructure, creating an immediate need for telecommunications to coordinate the large humanitarian response.

In response to this escalating crisis, the ETS was mobilized in Bangladesh in August 2017 to provide vital telecommunications support to the humanitarian organizations operating on the ground.

Throughout the sector's response period from 2017 to 2024, the ETS focused on expanding internet connectivity and establishing reliable security communications across humanitarian hubs and camps. This was essential in facilitating communication, coordination, and delivery of basic services to the displaced Rohingya population. The sector's activities included setting up connectivity in strategic locations, reinforcing the telecommunications infrastructure against natural disasters, and providing technical training to field workers.

By February 2024, the ETS had implemented an exit strategy and initiated the process of handing over its operations to local partners.

Operational Challenges

The rapid expansion of the refugee camps created logistical and infrastructural challenges throughout the ETS response. Services were frequently disrupted by connectivity issues such as fibre cuts, equipment damage, and power outages, and importation of ICT equipment could be lengthy.

The geographical location and environmental conditions of the Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar—vulnerable to monsoon and cyclone seasons—posed severe operational challenges. Natural disasters, including Cyclone Mocha in May 2023 and the annual monsoon rains threatened the reliability of telecommunications infrastructure.

Additionally, the ETS faced significant funding challenges, highlighted by the lack of funding towards the US\$1.7 million requirement in 2022. The sector managed to achieve an 84% funding status for 2023, highlighting the challenge of sustaining operational funding over the long term.

ETS Activities

Coordination and information management

Staffing

Following the mobilization of the ETS in response to the Rohingya refugee crisis in August 2017, a dedicated ETS Coordinator and Information Management Officer (IMO) were deployed to Cox's Bazar to support the local inter-agency ICT team.

Over time, the staffing structure within the ETS evolved to better address the needs of the operation. This included the addition of roles such as ICT Specialists to enhance the delivery of telecommunications services. The ETS response was also boosted by personnel deployed through the World Food Programme (WFP) Fast IT and Telecommunications Emergency and Support Team (FITTEST).

Personnel from Global ETC partners Cisco Response Crisis, Ericsson Response, and NetHope engaged remotely in supporting the team to provide technical expertise in the first quarter of 2020.

User satisfaction surveys

The ETS in Bangladesh carried out annual user satisfaction surveys to gather feedback from its service users on gaps and improvements to be made. The results are summarized here:

YEAR	USER SATISFACTION SCORE	COMMENTS
2018	95%	Bangladesh scored the highest user satisfaction score this year compared with other ETC/ETS operations globally.
2019	94%	Overall user satisfaction was once again at its highest levels.
2020	89%	Areas for improvement included better advocacy of ETS services and more training opportunities.
2021	90%	The relatively high user satisfaction score reflected the ETS adaptation to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, such as providing connectivity in quarantine centres.
2022	86%	Feedback received in 2022 included the need for solar power solutions and improved data connectivity to provide better running of ETS services.
2023	87%	A dip in user satisfaction with ETS helpdesk services was reported, indicative of a reduced staff presence ahead of the sector transition.

Capacity building

The ETS organized various capacity-building initiatives, including technical training sessions and workshops for humanitarian partners. These training sessions were essential in ensuring that partners were equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to use telecommunications technologies effectively, aiming to enhance the operational effectiveness and safety of the humanitarian efforts in Cox's Bazar.

ETS Services

Data connectivity

The ETS provided stable and reliable internet connectivity to a wide range of humanitarian actors operating in the Cox's Bazar area including UN agencies, international NGOs, and local partners.

The ETS undertook significant efforts to develop and maintain the connectivity infrastructure. This included the expansion of the data connectivity network to include new sites, and the upgrade of existing infrastructure, effectively connecting a total of 102 sites by the end of 2023.

Below is a timeline of ETS internet connectivity service delivery in Bangladesh from 2017 to 2024:

YEAR	COMMENTS
2017	Data connectivity efforts initiated with deployments focusing on establishing and coordinating ICT response among humanitarian partners. Deployment of three Ericsson Response WIDER kits to support the user management.
2018	Completion of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for the provision of internet connectivity services and equipment in information hubs. Expansion of ETS internet connectivity services across refugee camps in Cox's Bazar.
2019	Upgrade and maintenance of data connectivity services across camps, supporting an increasing the number of humanitarian users.
2020	Engaged Global ETC partners Cisco Crisis Response, Ericsson Response, and NetHope to design a new connectivity network to establish long-lasting services in the camps. The infrastructure was transitioned from April to December 2020, including the decommissioning of the Ericsson Response WIDER solution and the setup of IT solutions procured locally. Focus on supporting 15,000 humanitarian workers with connectivity requirements amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Coordinated provision of data connectivity services in Severe Acute Respiratory Infection (SARI) treatment centres and Infection Treatment Centres (ITCs), bringing the total number of sites to 34.
2021	Set up data connectivity services for humanitarians in response to the fire in Kutupalong Rohingya refugee camp and three new International Organization for Migration (IOM) sites supported with off-grid solar power. Providing data connectivity services across 39 sites.
2022	Provided data connectivity services across 72 sites.
2023	Relocation of the core ETS data connectivity network from Ukhiya to Cox's Bazar for improved services. Continuation of ETS service delivery across an end total of 102 sites, with a focus on enhancing infrastructure.
February 2024	Transition of ETS connectivity services in Bangladesh to WFP.

Security communications

The ETS established a comprehensive VHF radio security communications network to enhance the safety and security of humanitarian workers in the field. This network facilitated clear and reliable communication across the camps and operational sites.

Below is a timeline of ETC security communications services Bangladesh from 2017 to 2024:

YEAR	COMMENTS
2017	Deployment of VHF radio equipment and initial setup of security communications services for humanitarian agencies.

2018	Expansion of the common security communications network in Cox's Bazar.
2019	ICT improvements at the Madhuchara Logistics hub to improve site security and enable more users to access the network.
2020	Implementation of major upgrades to improve the VHF radio network and enhance security communications. Provision of data connectivity and security communications services to more than 994 users (478 daily active users) in the camp and other operational areas for 10 UN agencies in Cox's Bazar.
2021	Improved the security communications network in Teknaf and Ukhiya after challenges of limited radio coverage reported in multiple sites throughout the camps.
2022	A total of 939 monthly VHF radio users utilized the ETS security communications network.
2023	Stabilized two repeaters for security communications in Teknaf and Shamlapur following Severe Tropical Cyclone Mocha. Approval of transition to digital VHF radio systems in Cox's Bazar to significantly enhance security communications.
February 2024	Transition of ETS security communications services in Bangladesh to the United Nations Department for Safety and Security (UNDSS).

ICT Helpdesk

An ICT helpdesk was set up in the early stages of the ETS response to ensure the continuity of data connectivity services and support to the humanitarian operations by promptly addressing technical issues.

A mobile application channel was developed allowing users to report issues and receive updates on maintenance and outages, thereby enhancing the responsiveness and efficiency of the ETS helpdesk in addressing users' needs. This will carry on through WFP for the data connectivity services.

Services for Communities

The ETS established services and initiatives for communities in Cox's Bazar in 2017 as part of the response to the Rohingya refugee crisis. In close collaboration with the Communications with Communities (CwC) Working Group, the ETS conducted Information Needs Assessments and developed targeted interventions as part of its approach to improving communication for the displaced populations.

In October 2017, the ETS and the CwC Working Group conducted initial assessments to identify key information needs and the preferred means of communication among the refugee community.

During 2018 and 2019, the ETS continued its engagement with the CwC Working Group and further developed its services for communities' initiatives. This included technical assistance for setting up Information Centres and expanding community radio coverage.

Throughout its activation, the ETS focused on expanding and maintaining the data connectivity network, including the increase in the number of sites connected and improvements to the

telecommunications infrastructure, critical components for ensuring access to information and communication for both humanitarian actors and affected communities.

Information Hubs and CwC Centres

In 2018, the ETS facilitated the setup of [29 Information Centres](#) across the camps in coordination with the CwC Working Group. These centres were established to disseminate essential information to the refugee community, supported by the technical and equipment assistance provided by the ETS including provision of multimedia projectors, sound systems, fuel, and solar power solutions as well as 3G mobile internet connectivity. The initiative sought to improve refugee access to essential services and information.

Mobile Application 'ETC CONNECT'

Following the Information Needs Assessments, the ETS developed and piloted a mobile application named '[ETC CONNECT](#)' in 2017. This application was designed to enable communication between Rohingya refugees and humanitarians in Cox's Bazar, facilitating better communication and information dissemination.

Inter-agency Feedback Mechanisms

Working alongside the Inter Sector Coordination Group (ISCG) and the CwC Working Group, the ETS offered technical support to set up a common database to facilitate the flow of information.

The above activities were transitioned out as no longer needed.

Funding

The ETS operation in Bangladesh was supported by contributions from international donors, including a significant allocation from the United States Bureau of Humanitarian Affairs (BHA). The sector achieved an 84% funding status for 2023, with a budget of US\$1.15 million, underscoring the global commitment to supporting humanitarian telecommunications needs in crisis situations.

Due to the transition of ETS Bangladesh services in 2024, no sector funding was requested this year and the residual balance from 2023 is consumed.

There were eight key donor organizations who supported the ETS in Bangladesh during its seven-year response: Government of Australia, Government of Japan, Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), UK Department of International Development (DFID), UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), United States BHA, and WFP.

The funding status of the ETS from 2017 to 2024 is summarized below:

DATE	ACTIVITY
August 2017	ETS mobilized in Bangladesh in response to the Rohingya refugee crisis with initial WFP funding advance.
2017	The ETS received US\$600,000 from the Government of Japan and US\$300,000 from DFID to cover the original planned Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) 2017 until March 2018.
2018	65.7% was received out of the US\$1.2 million required for ETS activities until the end of 2018 from the UK FCDO, Government of Australia, and the NRC.

2020	In 2020, the ETS received a contribution of US\$1.78 million from the Government of Australia and US\$2 million from BHA. The ETS was therefore 74% funded out of a required US\$5.1 million to fund activities in 2020.
2021	Total funding of US\$1.15 million was received in 2021 from KOICA and BHA out of a total required budget of US\$3.9 million.
2022	The ETS received a contribution of US\$1 million from BHA. With this contribution, the ETS was 59% funded out of a required US\$1.7 million to deliver services in 2022.
2023	US\$970,000 was received from BHA, bringing the ETS funding status for 2023 to 84% out of a required US\$1.15 million.

All information related to the ETS Bangladesh operation can be found on the website:
www.etcluster.org/emergencies/bangladesh-refugee-crisis