1.   Background

The Working Group on Emergency Telecommunications (WGET) was first convened by DHA in November 1994 in order to provide guidance to the RCB (now DRB) project on Emergency Telecommunications with and in the Field, DPR121(29). The work within this project, which exists since the 1970's, had at that time been intensified, in particular as a consequence of the implementation of Resolution 7 of the First World Telecommunication Development Conference (Buenos Aires, 1994), calling for the creation of an international regulatory framework to facilitate Emergency Telecommunications. The IASC (Heads of Agencies) Meeting in December 1994 expressed the need for a coordinating mechanism for telecommunications in humanitarian assistance, and entrusted the newly created WGET with this mandate.

The WGET is an open forum of all partners in international humanitarian assistance, United Nations entities as well as NGOs, the ICRC and experts from the academia and the private sector. It normally meets twice annually, and maintains continuous contact between its members through two e-mail lists and one web site. The activities are supported by the WGET secretariat, maintained by OCHA within the DRB Project on Emergency Telecommunications. Telecommunications are increasingly seen as a part of Information Technology (IT), and the WGET maintains close contact with the Telecommunications Advisory Group of the Information Technology Coordinating Committee (ISCC).

2.   Main Achievements of the WGET

On the two main sectors covered by its mandates, the following results of the WGET partners' work are most noticeable:

-       The *Tampere Convention on the Provision of Telecommunication Resources for Disaster Mitigation and Relief Operations*, and

-       The *Telecommunication Coordination Officer* concept and the agreement on *standard telecommunication channels for safety and security and for on-site coordination.*

Additional activities and outputs of the WGET include

- Continuous evaluation of new technologies, in particular concerning their appropriateness and affordability for use in disaster mitigation and response and their coordinated introduction;

- Continuous evaluation of most appropriate equipment, networks and operational procedures for the use of telecommunications for the safety and security of humanitarian personnel in the field and, in close cooperation with the ISCC, development of respective standards;

- Consolidated negotiations with commercial telecommunication service providers, in particular those of the mobile satellite services, resulting in substantive savings through favorable tariffs for humanitarian users and the provision of free services during the acute phase of natural disaster by one enterprise;

- Cooperation with the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), resulting, inter alia, in *Resolution 98 of the Plenipotentiary Conference (Minneapolis, MN, 1998) on the Use of Telecommunications for the Safety and Security of Humanitarian Personnel in the Field*, in the publication of the *Disaster Communications Handbook for Developing Countries* of the ITU Telecommunications Development Bureau(BDT) in 2000, and the continuous cooperation with the ITU Radiocommunication Bureau (RB) in regulatory issues concerning United Nations networks in countries affected by humanitarian crises;

- Cooperation with the private sector, resulting in the active participation of and sponsorships for various activities by corporations under their corporate citizenship programmes;

- Support to participating entities in ensuring compatibility of equipment and network standards, resulting in faster deployment and more effective utilization of equipment and expertise;

The work towards the successful adoption of the *Tampere Convention on the Provision of Telecommunication Resources for Disaster Mitigation and Relief Operations* was a major task of the WGET from 1994 -1998. The first step was Resolution 7 of the 1994 World Telecommunication Development Conference (WTDC) of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), requesting ITU to increase its involvement in disaster communications and to closely work with the humanitarian community. The resolution was endorsed by the 1994 ITU Plenipotentiary Conference in its Resolution 36, which became the keystone in the development of the draft Tampere Convention. Two other ITU conferences, the 1997 World Radiocommunication Conference and the 1998 WTDC, adopted subsequent resolutions, urging ITU Member States to give their full support to the adoption of the Tampere Convention.

In 1998, the Intergovernmental Conference on Emergency Telecommunications (ICET-98) held in Tampere, Finland, adopted the Treaty, deposited with the United Nations Secretary-General. *Resolution 36 of the ITU Plenipotentiary Conference (Minneapolis, 1998) on Telecommunications in the Service of Humanitarian Assistance* urged ITU Member States to work towards the earliest possible ratification, acceptance, approval or final signature of the Tampere Convention. Most recently, *United Nations General Assembly Resolution 54/233* reiterated this appeal to all Member States.

The Tampere Convention provides a legal framework for international telecommunication assistance in humanitarian relief. It sets out well-defined yet flexible terms for the provision, termination, repatriation and remuneration of international telecommunication resources used in disaster reliefs. It also defines the privileges, immunities and facilities of international emergency telecommunication workers. It encourages signatories to reduce and/or remove regulatory barriers against efficient deployment of disaster telecommunication resources, and it provides for the development of model agreements in such deployments. The most distinguishing feature of the Convention is that it allows "non-state entities" to avail themselves of some of the Convention's benefits when they are providing international emergency telecommunication assistance. This, so far unique, feature is of particular importance in the context of the increasing role of the private sector as partner in international humanitarian assistance.

There are currently 47 signatories to, and 4 ratifications of, the Tampere Convention. As 30 ratifications are needed for the Tampere Convention to enter into force, and the Convention is open for signature at the UN headquarters in New York until June 2003. The Convention nevertheless already serves its purpose even among and with States who are not signatories, as it provides the standard framework to be referred to in bi- and multi-lateral agreements on the provision of assistance.

The WGET will continue, based on the Plan of Action adopted in 1998, its efforts in raising the necessary awareness for the earliest possible ratification, application and implementation of the Tampere Convention by the largest number of States.

3.   The Telecommunications Coordination Officer Concept

Telecommunications are a vital component of coordination; they can, however, fulfil this function only if the networks of the various partners in humanitarian assistance are closely coordinated. To facilitate such coordination on the local and regional level, the WGET has developed the concept of the Telecommunications Coordination Officer (TCO), with Terms of Reference which were endorsed by the IASC in 1998.

Under this concept, the most senior telecommunications officer, of the agency which is in the best position to do so in a given location and situation, assumes the function of the TCO. The incumbent of this function is determined among the heads of telecommunication services of the agencies and entities involved in the particular operation. The TCO is not only the focal point for the coordination of the various networks and the sharing of resources, but also ensures the

technical and operational liaison with the telecommunication authorities of the host country. The TCO concept is widely utilized, most recently during the Mozambique floods.

4.   Present and Future Activities

Most activities of the WGET are, due to the rapid technological developments as well as due to the unpredictable changes in situations encountered in the field, of a continuous nature. Two priorities have been defined for the year 2000: The implementation of the Tampere Convention and the work towards its ratification by the largest possible number of Member States, and the application of telecommunication resources for the safety and security of humanitarian personnel in the field. Other activities include in particular the development of training concepts for telecommunication personnel as well as for the users of telecommunication services, the emergency managers, the standardization of equipment, in particular of the rapid deployment kits being developed by various agencies and the private sector, and a further increase of the cooperation with the ITU, in particular the BDT.

The work of a group which only meets twice annually can not be carried out without a secretariat which maintains the contact with all partners, supports the various ad-hoc teams of experts and ensures the representation of the interests of all partners in international humanitarian assistance in the respective fora. The functions of the WGET secretariat are carried out under the Emergency Telecommunications Project of OCHA (DRB), and the information contained in *OCHA-2000* refers.

The possibility to transfer the activities from a project to an *ITU/OCHA Emergency Telecommunications Unit* (similar to the UNEP/OCHA unit) in DRB is, in view of the core-character of telecommunications and IT being considered since 1998 and could be expected result in considerable increase of effectiveness of the work. Such a solution will, however, depend on the availability of sufficient resources.

Detailed information on the WGET, including the minutes of all meetings since 1994 and the Terms of Reference for TCOs are available on a restricted site within the web pages on Emergency Telecommunications at <http://www.reliefweb.int/telecoms>. For access to this restricted site, as well as for subscriptions to the e-mail lists <emergency-telecoms> and <wget>, please contact <hans.zimmermann@ties.itu.int>.

5.   Recommendations

A) Agencies need to make sure that all entities at headquarters concerned with technical, operational or administrative aspects of telecommunications in the field, as well as field offices, **implement the standards for telecommunication equipment and networks agreed by the Working Group on Emergency Telecommunications** (WGET).

B) Agencies' representatives to the WGET will report regularly on progress achieved in the implementation of the above point A. The WGET will then report to the IASC-WG.

C) Agencies and their field offices should, whenever agreements with a host country are being concluded, include a reference either to the *Tampere Convention on the Provision of Telecommunication Resources for Disaster Mitigation and Relief Operations* in general or to specific articles thereof. Existing agreements should be reviewed in respect to their content concerning the use of telecommunications by humanitarian agencies and revised or amended accordingly.

D) Agencies should instruct their representatives in the field to promote the *Tampere Convention* in their contacts with host country authorities and to encourage them to deposit their document of signature or ratification with the United Nations Secretary General as soon as possible.

Under the mandate of operational coordinator, given to the Emergency Relief Coordinator in the Tampere Convention, the secretariat of the WGET, maintained by OCHA (DRB), will provide support for the implementation of the above recommendations.