TECHNOLOGY PUT TO THE TEST AS PARTS OF EAST AFRICA REEL FROM EFFECTS OF ASIAN TSUNAMIS

The relief effort in the wake of the Asian tsunamis has highlighted the importance of using ICT. African aid agencies have become significant ICT users and have sophisticated ICT managers. Communication is key in when disasters occur as communications links are often disrupted. Yet for disaster relief workers who arrive on the scene these links are essential as they rely heavily on telecommunications to coordinate the complicated logistics of rescue and relief operations. This week Mapara Syed looks at how different aid agencies have used ICT to tackle the impact of tsunami waves on the coasts of East Africa and its offshore islands and how ICT companies and African Governments are donating money and resources to the relief effort.

In Somalia, the worst hit along the horn of Africa coastline from the earthquake-generated tsunamis, it has been reported that nearly 300 people have now lost their lives and an estimate of approximately 54,000 people have been displaced, according to relief workers and local authorities.

There have been reports of displaced people in Bander Beyla, Baargaal and Eyl, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), which is managing efforts to assist those affected. The most affected region of Somalia¹s coastline though has been Puntland in the north-east, particularly the Hafun peninsula, where there has been considerable damage to buildings

El-Balla Hagona, the UN Development Programme's Director for Somalia, said that unlike other affected countries in Asia, Somalia lacked the "indigenous capacity to assess the damage" caused by the tsunami and "that has placed that responsibility on the UN and its collaborators,² who have appealed for USD13 million to be raised for the Somali reconstruction.

The area is remote and difficult to reach and the UN has been using radio communication and satellite technology as a key part of its relief operations. On the remote island of Hafun, where 3000 people have had their lives disrupted, stories have emerged of how inhabitants marooned there used VHF radios and sms text messaging to get in touch with people on the mainland.

Much of the Hafun area lacks fixed line phones and there is a general lack of communications throughout the Puntland region. Nicholas Haan, the Chief Technical Adviser with the Food Security Analysis Unit (FSAU) for Somalia explained how most of the towns in this region communicate using radios and

thus humanitarian agencies are relying on high frequency radio communications to contact survivors in inaccessible areas. ³Our staff on the ground have been using a combination of HF radio to communicate with villages and satellite thuraya phones, where there are no phone networks, to then provide feedback to us here in Nairobi.²

Data is being transmitted to the FSAU offices in Kenya, where Somalia¹s interim government is based, through laptops, which every one of the thirty-four members of the field team is equipped with. Once a field agent reached an affected area they used ³the global positioning system (GPS) installed within their sat-phones to relay longitude and latitude coordinates back to us either through their laptops or via sms,² said Haan.

Satellite technology has not only been used to provide coordinates but is also being used to produce high resolution images of the devastated parts of Somalia. ³We are using IKONOS satellite imagery, which is 1m resolution, to determine the tsunami affected areas² along with aerial surveys.

As an advisory unit, the FSAU collect information and then distributes it to the relevant agencies providing the aid needed, so once the areas involved are identified relief workers know exactly where they need to concentrate their efforts. Haan went on to say that they were also monitoring the general climatic situation using the American satellite NOA and SPOT satellite imagery supplied by the Joint Research Commission in Europe. It is evident that satellite technology has been fundamental in the recovery effort, not only in Africa, but throughout the peripheral of the Indian Ocean.
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