



European
Commission

Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection

SPEECH by Claus SORENSEN, Director-General European Satellite Day, 27 September 2012/Brussels

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Dear Vice-President Tajani, Honourable Member Gardini, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to speak here today at the inaugural EU Satellite Day. I would like to thank the European Satellite Operators Association and all of the other organisers for having launched this initiative.

Every sector of our modern society takes advantage of the benefits satellites provide. But strangely enough we tend to forget how much we actually depend on this invisible infrastructure above our heads. I would not like to imagine the emergency we would find ourselves in should we ever have to face a day without satellites – even if emergencies are our daily bread and butter work at DG ECHO.

Why is satellite infrastructure so important for emergency response? It is because it gives us the ability to communicate and assess no matter what terrestrial infrastructure a disaster may have destroyed. They thus help us to provide an efficient response.

Even before a disaster happens satellites enhance our preparedness to face them. The sensors they carry ensure a continuous flow of earth observation data. By feeding this data into early warning systems, such as for floods, forest fires, or storms we are nowadays able to forecast events with a very high level of accuracy. This gives precious time to emergency management authorities to prepare for disasters. Better preparedness eventually means saving lives.

Today I would like to give you some examples how important satellites have become for the work of Directorate General Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection.

When a disaster occurs communication is of the essence. Our EU experts and teams on the ground have to be able to communicate immediately the needs of the populations that have been hit by a disaster. But when the terrestrial infrastructure has been destroyed – as after the earthquake in 2010 in Haiti – satellites are the only

solution to bridge this gap because they will never be affected by an earthquake. In the absence of GSMs, fixed telephony and internet, satellite phones were the only way to reach our teams on the ground during the first days after the disaster. Without them we would have been deaf when our aid was needed most.

In this context I would also like to recall the important work of Télécoms Sans Frontières. TSF is one of the about 200 ECHO partners that mobilise and implement relief on the ground. In Haiti they did a tremendous job in providing satellite communication in the first days after the event and helped to fill the critical communication gap.

Besides communication, imagery is another service satellites offer. Satellite images allow us quick but detailed assessments of a situation in the direct aftermath or during an emergency. Let us take the current crisis in Syria as an example. At the end of July the Government of Jordan opened the Al Zaatri camp in the north of the country to harbour Syrian refugees. The UN Refugee Agency then asked the German Federal Agency for Technical Relief to build the sanitary infrastructure for the camp. This is a major undertaking which needs proper planning. Just imagine that this camp which did not even exist two months ago may soon harbour 80.000 refugees. This is a mid-sized city.

Germany therefore requested satellite maps through the GMES Emergency Mapping Service, a European service which is managed jointly by Directorate General Enterprise, the Joint Research Centre and DG ECHO and can provide emergency maps instantly. Since then maps of the camp have been produced on a regular basis. You can see some of them on the screen.

From August to September the number of refugees has increased constantly and so has the infrastructure of the camp. The European satellite maps that have been provided have been important to make such a rapid progress helping to provide basic shelter and sanitation for Syrians who had to leave their country under terrible circumstances.

Satellites will remain important for our work in the future. Their instant availability during a crisis makes them an indispensable tool for emergency response. Without them our response capacity would be weaker. We are therefore very glad to know that we have a European satellite capability that we can make use of. But of course we also hope that European research and development will provide us with even better solutions in the years to come.

Thank you very much.