Journal Title: Telecommunication Journal

Journal Issue: Vol. 58, no. 5 (1991)

Article Title: ''The Safety of Human Life''

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Page number(s): p. 259

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The safety of human life

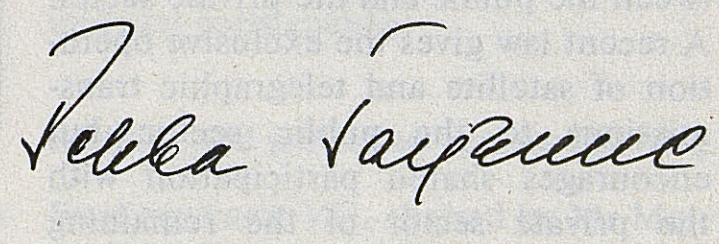
This year, the theme of World Telecommunication Day is a subject which is close to the hearts of everyone of us. Ensuring the safety of human life is an activity in which telecommunications have made and continue to make a quite unique contribution. That is why it will also be celebrated as part of the Natural Disaster Prevention Decade proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly.

The first commercial radio telegraph services were introduced at the end of the 19th century. This new communication medium was a godsend to mariners in distress. Yet, if lives were to be saved, the message had to be heard. For this reason, an international agreement, signed in Berlin in 1906, specified that "Wireless telegraph stations must give absolute priority to receiving and replying to distress signals from ships and take all appropriate action." This same agreement included the international adoption of the SOS signal. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) introduced other safety measures: ships should have a radio set on board; special radio frequencies were reserved for distress signals. Safety requirements have also been applied on land, in the air, and more recently, in outer space.

Over the coming decade, the Global Maritime Distress and Safety System will be brought into use. This new system, developed by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) in collaboration with the ITU and other bodies, will provide a new degree of safety to seafarers.

Today we possess an array of telecommunication services for use in disaster prevention, early warning and relief. Transportable satellite earth stations can be used for emergency communications and, coupled with land-based facilities, provide a vital tool for relief operations. However, much remains to be done to ensure the fast transborder movement of such telecommunications equipment to disaster sites. With this in mind, the ITU, working with other concerned organizations, has proposed a project to facilitate the speedy movement and customs clearance of telecommunications equipment for disaster use, which could, in due course, lead to an international convention. Also, cellular technology can prove to be a solution to the difficult problem of providing telecommunications outside major urban centres and, in particular, for emergencies.

It is, indeed, my ambition to speed up the arrival of relief for anyone in danger or distress, wherever disaster may strike or, more generally, in need of assistance in rural and remote areas.



Pekka TARJANNE