



Helen Jameson
Editor

Bridging the communications gap for refugees

Of all the humanitarian crises that are affecting the EMEA region at the moment, the one that is gathering most attention is that of the plight of Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan refugees sweeping across Europe. It is a human tragedy, and the footage we see on news reports and the images that are splashed across the newspapers day after day only serve to remind us of the hardship that is being endured by these men, women and children who, for the most part, are simply trying to seek a better life for their families. Life in their native countries has gradually become unsustainable. They cannot find work, cannot earn a wage, and cannot afford rent or enough food and basic needs. They are left with no choice but to leave their homeland, often war-torn, to look for something better.

Communications are playing a critical role in the quest to help refugees find assistance, shelter and ultimately, a better life. Satellite and other technologies are helping humanitarian agencies to communicate effectively so that they are able to source the basic supplies that they need to treat, feed, clothe and house the refugees. Communications are absolutely critical to make sense of the chaos that ensues when such a vast amount of people flood an area. Whether those communications are mobile and keep those who are assessing the situation on the ground in touch with HQ, or whether they are fixed and providing a temporary office where people can be processed and pointed in the right direction for their needs.

On a personal level, connections with loved ones are priceless for those who have fled their country. Many refugees do own mobile phones, but whether they can make calls on them is a different matter. Infrastructure can be very patchy, and top-ups may not be available so that basic need of making a phone call can be facilitated by humanitarian organisations such as Telecoms Sans Frontieres so that people can make that precious phone call to loved ones.

Communications are also helping on an educational level, in refugee camps where Internet connections are made available so that children can learn and attempt to carry on with their education despite their situation. Temporary schools set up by humanitarian organisations give children hope and some relief from their troubles by providing educational activities and ICT equipment such as tablets and computers.

For parents, access to a computer and the Internet offers a huge amount of hope and ways in which they can contact authorities and organisations for assistance. Vital information on steps that they may take to improve their situation can be found online, through many governmental portals and through other organisations geared up to help the refugee community such as the World Food Programme and the United Nations High Council for Refugees.

So, communications really do help the refugee community. Mark Zuckerberg has pledged, along with the UN, that he will bring Internet connectivity to the refugee camps. Interestingly, Facebook has just partnered with Eutelsat on an initiative that will boost Internet access across Africa.

Satellite is there to be used for the greater good, because it has proved that it can create communications from nowhere. Nothing else is required but a satellite antenna. It must be used to facilitate the communications that are so badly needed to not just help people to improve their lives, but to be able to say the words "Hello. I am ok" to their loved ones. 🌍

