



First Responders: A Prepositioned Response

David Hartshorn, Secretary General of the Global VSAT Forum, talks about how the GVF is helping change the paradigm of how the private sector can support the first responder community in ways that are financially sustainable



David Hartshorn is Secretary General of the GVF, the London-based non-profit international association of the satellite industry. The Global VSAT Forum consists of more than 170 members from every major region of the world and from every sector of the industry, including satellite operators, manufacturers, system integrators, and other service providers.

Mr. Hartshorn leads the Forum's efforts to facilitate the provision of satellite-based communications solutions throughout all nations of the world. In particular, Mr. Hartshorn works closely to support national-, regional- and global-level policy makers as they formulate state-of-the-art satellite regulatory frameworks.

He is also responsible for creating greater awareness of the commercial, economic, political and technological advantages that VSAT-based communications provide.

Mr. Hartshorn has worked in the satellite communications industry for 18 years, serving in sales, business development, publishing and association offices based in North and Southeast Asia, North America and Western Europe.

He has been published in hundreds of editions of

magazines and newsletters, and has spoken and chaired at conferences and seminars in every major region of the world.

Q: What's the background to this initiative?

A: We have been working for years on facilitating faster response efforts. At the request of the United Nations (UN), Non Governmental Organisations (NGO) and the military we have now launched a disaster preparedness initiative which we are coordinating world wide and which relates to everyone who is in the communications sector.

Most of the history of how the communications sector supports first responders has been on the basis of a reactive paradigm. Fundamentally, the way it traditionally happens is that the first responder community wants preparedness and prepositioning but they only have a budget for that in locations that are regularly and predictably hit by natural disasters, like Japan or the Gulf of Mexico. First responders throughout the world also want prepositioning, but it never fully materialises because there is no money on the front end. The necessary finance comes only after the disaster occurs, when it is too late. After each disaster in the fifteen years that we have been involved in facilitating response efforts, our partners come back to us afterwards telling us we have to break this reactive paradigm.

Q: So what changed?

A: Haiti changed things. That was the largest reactive response effort in history. A lot of our member companies dug deep into their pockets and provided systems, services and in some cases personnel, largely with no strings attached. They nevertheless came away from the exercise very disenfranchised because despite all of the resources that had been provided for the response effort – and regardless of the good effect that those resources had – they knew that they couldn't consistently respond in the same way elsewhere. Underlining that point was the Pakistan flood where there was only a tiny fraction of resource contributions because the communications industry had thrown so much into

- Haiti that they couldn't now turn and do the same in Pakistan.

The UN has been trying to find a way to promote a more consistent and predictable flow of support from the private sector to enable their relief efforts to move forward forcefully. Once the dust in Haiti had settled, our phone started to ring from NGOs and the UN with whom we have been partners in disaster response. The UN held a conference call to use this most recent experience to drive forward a new approach, based on preparedness. They wanted globally pre-positioned communication systems, services and personnel, in co-ordination with local telecom providers who could also support medium, and long term development objectives following a disaster-relief effort. And there was no budget to pay for the pre-positioned resources.

Q: How did you respond?

A: We started thinking about it. A day after the Haiti earthquake struck, one of the contacts we had came from an NGO who needed help installing a VSAT terminal. We directed them to the GVF public database of technicians who had passed our VSAT-installation Certification requirements, one of whom was in Haiti. They sent a car for him and that VSAT was installed.

Following the conversation with the UN, we began thinking of that installer as, in effect, a pre-positioned human resource. If we turned our attention to the entire database we have over 1,000 personnel that we have certified, with contact details publicly listed in the database and we could designate that entire pool of talent as potentially pre-positioned human resources. We have now notified all of those technicians that we are including them in a disaster-preparedness initiative in co-ordination with the UN, NGOs and other first responders.

That begins to address the pre-positioned personnel requirement, but what about systems and services? On reflection, we turned our attention to the GVF member companies; they either own or support most of the world's installed base of satellite systems and services, as well as a vast infrastructure of wireless and wireline systems. They are either the local service provider, or they support the local service provider. We realised that we could co-ordinate through our membership to designate their systems and services – and potentially those of their customers – as pre-positioned resources. If a disaster occurs in close proximity to those systems and services, they could then be repurposed either temporarily or permanently to support the relief effort. The re-purposing of these resources can be on whatever terms are mutually agreeable to the parties involved.

The UN or NGOs would not have to pay anything for these services to be designated as “pre-positioned”; they are already out there earning their own keep. All we have to do is to get tacit agreement in principle from whoever owns them that they would be willing to repurpose them for relief efforts where possible. In some cases, the UN and NGOs also want these resources to support medium and long term development objectives. If after being used in a relief effort, an entity who has engaged the use of these systems or services now wants them to be used for medium and long term development support, then they can. The systems or services can either go back to what they were doing before the disaster – and it may well be for medium and long term

development support – or they can be permanently repurposed on contractual terms, if both parties agree.

What we have here is, in essence, a value chain that flows through from the designation of pre-positioned systems, services and personnel, to their potential use in supporting a relief effort, and to the possibility that they may be permanently or temporarily repurposed to support medium and long term development. The personnel and whoever owns the systems or services are at liberty to engage the first responders on whatever terms are agreeable. It could be a straight-up donation, or it could be a donation for an initial period followed by standard contractual terms, or it could be standard contractual terms throughout.

Q: What's the GVF's role in this?

A: We are not going to get in the middle between first responders and providers of system and service. We are in the process of launching the GVF Disaster Preparedness Registry. On the face of it, it is a new website search designator on our Member Directory. When a disaster occurs the UN, an NGO or anyone can come into the GVF Member Directory, search the database by entering the search designator “Disaster Preparedness Registry”, and contact details will appear for GVF member companies who have stepped forward to have their names appear in the Registry. Having stepped forward, they will have made preparations internally so that their company and/or their customers will have someone on standby ready to take the call when a disaster occurs in an area where they operate. When they take that call, they will be prepared to determine whether they have rapidly deployable systems and/or resources that are in the country that could be repurposed for use in the response effort.

Some members will say no, they will have security issues or bureaucratic concerns and other obstacles. In many cases however, we know that members are committed to the idea. The heart of this initiative is really a new way of thinking about what the communication industry already has out there in the field and thinking in terms of preparedness throughout the whole value chain, from the suppliers down through to value added resellers of services and the in-country network operators. They all have a vested interest in seeing a successful outcome through disaster preparedness, response and development.

Q: What decisions have been made to turn this into reality?

A: In late March, we signed an agreement with the UN who are supporting us on this initiative. We also have an agreement with **Nethope** who represent 32 of the largest humanitarian organisations. We are continuing to confirm communications users and customers and we are coordinating so that they and their resources can be included in the strategy. Once the Registry is launched, and when the next disaster occurs, the UN, NGOs and other responders will go to that database, search it, and contact industry, which will by definition make best efforts to support that relief effort. We are creating a new paradigm that is purely focused on preparedness. We plan to launch the Registry at www.gvf.org this summer.

For more information visit: www.gvf.org