Case study

BT Emergency Response Team

Better prepared to assure a better future

Over the decades BT has reached out to communities dealing with and recovering from disasters. Its people and technology were there when the Indian Ocean Tsunami, the Kashmiri earthquakes and the floods in Pakistan struck. Most recently it was in action when Typhoon Haiyan devastated the Philippines and when the UK was hit by winter floods.

BT accomplishes this through its Emergency Response Team (ERT) – a 40-strong band of fully-equipped and highly-skilled engineers. Largely volunteers, the team's on permanent standby, ready to respond to emergencies right around the world.

" I'm proud to lead a team that's unique in every way. The commitment, enthusiasm, and skills of ERT members are second to none. At times of crisis you need to pull together and work as one team; the ERT does exactly that."

Craig Thorpe, Head of ERT, BT Technology, Service & Operations

"It makes me immensely proud that BT always steps forward in times of need. Our Emergency Response Team goes out to help set up emergency communication links between the worst affected areas so that aid can get to the right people at the right time."

Gavin Patterson, Chief executive, BT

For emergency situations at home and abroad, BT's Emergency Response Team is ready-to-roll right around the clock

Disaster relief

When disaster strikes telecoms can be critical to saving lives. Effective communication links are vital to co-ordinate immediate support efforts and ensure resources reach people and places most in need. In the longer term, restoring infrastructure or providing an alternative means of communication helps communities return to normal as quickly as possible.

BT has always responded to national and international emergency situations and in 2005 that capability became known as the Emergency Response Team (ERT). "We aren't there to fix standard services for individual customers," explains Craig Thorpe, head of the ERT in BT Technology, Service & Operations. "Rather, we work alongside first responders to restore and sustain essential services in emergency situations."

The principal role of the ERT is to help protect critical BT network infrastructure, both in the UK and abroad. Helping communities worldwide is an intrinsic element of BT's commitment to responsible business, and the team is often mobilised to assist with international disaster relief.

The power of communications

BT has a long track record of responding to international disasters. "It makes me immensely proud that BT always steps forward in times of need," comments Gavin Patterson, chief executive at BT. "Our Emergency Response Team goes out to help set up emergency communication links between the worst affected areas so that aid can get to the right people at the right time."

BT responded to the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004, the Kashmir earthquakes in 2005, and the typhoon that devastated areas of the Philippines in 2013. In each case the ERT provided satellite-based communications facilities both to enable relief workers to communicate and to help people displaced to temporary camps contact their loved ones.

Typhoon Haiyan

One of the world's deadliest storms, Typhoon Haiyan in November 2013 was the strongest tropical cyclone ever recorded, with sustained winds of over 195 mph, followed by a huge tidal surge causing floods of up to 20 feet. The storm left behind an apocalyptic landscape: millions homeless, lives shattered and over 5,000 people lost. BT activated its ERT as soon as the scale of the devastation emerged.

Craig Thorpe led the initial four-man BT reconnaissance team to carry out planning on the ground. "Every tree and every house was flattened for miles and miles and miles," recalls Craig. "People were just sitting on piles of rubble with nothing; it was heart-breaking." There was no power, no fixed line communications, no mobile networks.

BT was one of the first organisations to respond and three further BT team members soon arrived to help with equipment deployment. The initial objective was to provide satellite-based communications to three locations. Speed was of the essence. The sooner links could be established the faster relief workers could coordinate their efforts to save lives. As soon as the systems were online capacity was fully utilised.

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Niall Dunne, chief sustainability officer at BT, concludes: "Using our skills and technology, our Emergency Response Team effectively responds to incidents and disasters at home and overseas – a real demonstration of how we at BT use the power of communications to make a better world."

The ERT equipped for action

The ERT comprises a network of up to 40 highly-skilled and motivated engineers. Largely BT volunteers, the team is trained to respond to the most extreme emergency situations. Being well-equipped to face almost any challenge is vitally important; other first-responders and affected communities will rely on them.

The team is focused to ensure communications facilities are available to underpin relief efforts and support restoration of normal communication services for communities as soon as possible. "Many ERT members have previous armed services experience, but they all have one thing in common – a strong desire to help others in need," says Craig Thorpe.

Exacting selection processes and comprehensive training programmes prepare ERT volunteers – both physically and mentally – to work in hazardous environments and in countries suffering political unrest.

Some training is delivered or monitored by the UK Fire Service and the Police National CBRN (chemical, biological, nuclear, and radiological) Centre. Skills learned include self-defence and off-road and defensive driving techniques for personal protection in hostile environments, deployment and configuration of the communications systems used, life saving techniques, operating in HazMat protective suits, and the use of breathing apparatus for working in contaminated environments.

The team is on permanent standby 24/7 and individual members commit to at least 20 days rigorous training each year, for which they are released from their BT day jobs.

Steve Williams, a volunteer in BT's ERT for eight years, says: "Serving in the ERT can be daunting at times but it's also very rewarding. The training, preparation and equipment are second to none, and I get a great sense of achievement knowing that I'm using my skills to contribute to the greater good."

ERT personnel are also required to exercise alongside other category one blue light services (such as police, fire and ambulance). Each year the ERT runs four test deployments around simulated emergencies. Craig Thorpe explains: "Test events are vital for us to validate the effectiveness of our training and allow the team to put their skills into practice in challenging environments." Recent examples include a simulated air crash affecting a remote BT repeater station and an explosion and chemical spill near a BT facility.