

Global Amateur Radio Emergency Communications Conference 2006 (GAREC-2006)

At President Joel Harrison's request, I represented the ARRL at GAREC-2006, held at the conference center in Tampere, Finland, on June 19-20, 2006. Vice President Stafford attended the conference last year and gave me a helpful briefing on what to expect. I attended a preparatory meeting on the afternoon of June 18 before a social get-together at the city art museum that began the conference's program of activities.

While GAREC-2005 was a stand-alone conference, GAREC-2006 was held concurrently with the International Conference on Emergency Communications (ICEC2006) convened by Finland's Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Ministry of the Interior, and the Finnish Communication Regulatory Authority. The purpose of ICEC2006 (www3.hermia.fi/in_english/icec2006/) was to support ratification and implementation of the Tampere Convention of 1998.¹ The ICEC2006 conference statement adopted at the final session has been posted on the web at www3.hermia.fi/mp/db/file_library/x/IMG/12120/file/ConclusionsRecsICEC06.pdf. The program brochure for that conference is posted at www3.hermia.fi/in_english/icec2006/programme/.

GAREC-2006 was also held concurrently with a session of the ITU's Working Group on Emergency Telecommunications (WGET). Having the three conferences held concurrently offered opportunities for the GAREC-2006 participants to meet emergency communications officials from many governments and international agencies, some of whom are hams. It was also educational for us volunteer hams, because sometimes we do not grasp very well how our radio service fits into the very big and rapidly-changing picture of emergency telecommunications worldwide.

The three parallel conferences held joint opening and closing sessions. At the opening session, one of the speakers was IARU Vice President Tim Ellam VE6SH.

The GAREC-2006 preparatory meeting on Sunday afternoon was conducted by Hans Zimmerman HB9AQS/F5VKP, IARU's International Coordinator for Emergency Communications. After the meeting, Hans asked me if I would chair the first session of GAREC-2006 because he had to speak at the ICEC session in the same time slot. I agreed to do that and we went over the agenda topics slated for that session, which were to adopt the agenda, elect the conference chairperson, and hear statements from the representatives of the three IARU regions.

The attendance at GAREC-2006 was smaller than that of the previous year's event. There were 22 Amateurs at GAREC-2006, representing Italy, Sweden, India, Finland, Ireland, Canada, Venezuela, the Netherlands, Japan, Switzerland,

Greece, the United Kingdom, Bulgaria, and the United States. A few other hams who were delegates to the other conferences stopped in for parts of the GAREC-2006 sessions and one of them, Mark Wood G4HLZ, made a presentation at one of our sessions.

Following adoption of the agenda, I asked for suggestions about who should be the conference chairperson. I was nominated and the other participants agreed, so conducting the first session of the conference turned into chairing the whole thing.

The IARU Region statements were given by Panayot Danev LZ1US from Region 1, Reinaldo Leandro YV5AMH from Region 2, and Ramiah Ramachandra VU2RCR from Region 3.

Hans HB9AQS went over progress on the recommendations of GAREC-2005. The principal topics of the review were center of activity frequencies, an international Amateur Radio emergency communications handbook, and a leaflet or brochure about Amateur Radio emergency communications.

Establishment of emergency communications center of activity frequencies was recommended by GAREC-2005. Center of activity frequencies are not to be confused with calling frequencies. A calling frequency is one where operators meet and then move off to carry out communications on another frequency. It is just the reverse for a center of activity frequency. Operators in a disaster-stricken area make contact wherever they can on the bands, then move to a center of activity frequency to carry out communications. Operators wishing to find where emergency traffic is being exchanged will know to listen on or near the center of activity frequencies.

Establishment of global center of activity frequencies was recommended for 15, 17, and 20 meters.² Regional frequencies are more appropriate for 40 and 75 meters. No center of activity frequencies are proposed for 10 meters or above 30 MHz. IARU Region 1 has adopted the global and regional frequencies shown on the IARU web site emergency communications page. Regions 2 and 3 are yet to take up the subject at competent conferences.

The handbook project recommended in 2005 has made some progress but things have stalled recently. The project will be resumed. GAREC-2006 participants discussed their views on what should be in the handbook and what its purposes and audience should be. It is a challenge to produce a book that is useful worldwide – neither too generalized nor dominated by a few countries' practices. The recommended brochure has not been produced yet.

Conference participants were given the opportunity to make presentations about recent emergency operations involving the Amateur Radio Service in their home countries. Seven countries' participants made presentations: Sweden, India,

Greece, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and the United States.

A session was devoted to discussion of special and/or new concepts in emergency communications. Here Mark Wood G4HLZ of the Cellular Emergency Alert Systems Association (www.ceasa-international.com) described how the cellular broadcast public warning system could be used by Amateur Radio emergency communications organizations to alert their members. Later in the session he also discussed how eQSO (which seems to be more like IRLP than Echolink) is being used in the U.K. The group talked about Echolink in emergency communications. It is being used, as we know, but its dependence on repeater infrastructure is a vulnerability. We also discussed various advantages and disadvantages of ICOM's D-Star protocol equipment and the Winlink2000 network.

In one of the early sessions on the final day, we discussed points to include in the final conference statement. Because this document is not an input to a larger conference, it did not need to be as extensive as the statement from last year's conference. The group agreed on the points to include and the statement was drafted by Hans HB9AQS. It was adopted at the final GAREC-2006 session and will be posted on the conference web site.

There was discussion about future conferences and how to maintain the relationships created in 2005 and 2006. There was a general sense that holding a future conference in Region 2 or 3 might permit participation by representatives of more and/or different countries.

At the conclusion of the final session of GAREC-2006, the Finnish local organizer, Seppo Sisatto OH1VR, kindly presented me with a nice book of photographs of Tampere as a thank-you gift for chairing the conference.

The chance to get to know Amateurs from other countries who are involved in emergency communications is very worthwhile. It is easy for American Amateurs to assume that Amateur Radio emergency communications work in other countries is the same as what we are familiar with in the USA. However, for historical, cultural, and regulatory reasons this is not necessarily the case. We have much to learn from one another, whether Amateur Radio in one's home country has a long history of emergency communications service or has begun this activity relatively recently.

Although it was not possible to attend any of the ICEC2006 sessions except the opening and closing ones, looking over the program brochure reemphasized in my mind how important it is for Amateur Radio to avoid being dazzled by our own press clippings into thinking that we are the big dog in emergency telecommunications. The point of the Tampere Convention is to remove regulatory impediments to the swift deployment of modern emergency

telecommunications equipment and competent personnel, especially to disaster zones in those parts of the world where communications infrastructure may not have been much to talk about before the disaster struck and where regulatory environments may be hostile. For example, I saw a complete satellite communications system – dish and all – that collapses and can be carried in a hard case pack on one's back. Goodness knows what human being would be strong enough to carry the pack very far, but even if you had to move it in a vehicle the transportability of this sophisticated system was daunting.

Here in the USA, we see a post-Katrina emphasis on speeding up the deployment of sophisticated communications systems after disasters so that governmental and non-governmental organizations can get to work quickly. As the emergency telecomm world as a whole speeds up its reaction time, so we hams must be better organized, more capable, and as quick as possible on the scene after our help is requested, if we are not to arrive after our window of usefulness has closed. Given ham radio's dependency on emergency communications as our reason to exist in the USA, it would be suicidal to assume that what we have always been able to do, at the speed we have always been able to do it, will be just fine to maintain our relevance into the indefinite future.

There will always be a role for Amateur Radio and radio Amateurs to play in disasters. The question is whether we will suitably prepare ourselves to play it.

On Monday evening, participants in all three conferences enjoyed a boat ride on a local lake and a buffet dinner at a quaint building on an island in the lake. The weather was very warm the whole time I was in Finland, so being outdoors was pleasant even quite late in the evening. At this time of year the sun goes down around midnight and comes up again about two hours later. On Tuesday evening after the conference was over, about a dozen of us hams got together for an informal meal, did away with a quantity of Finnish beer, and told a few tall tales about our adventures on the air, as hams will do.

Respectfully submitted,
Kay Craigie N3KN

¹ Information about the Tampere Convention and its significance for Amateur Radio is posted on the IARU web site's emergency communications page. The GAREC-2005 output document which became an input document for the World Summit on the Information Society is posted at www.itu.int/wsis/docs2/pc3/contributions/co12.doc.

² See www.iaru.org/emergency/CoA2.html.