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PRESS RELEASE

GEO and ITU join forces on Earth observation satellites, emergencies and capacity building

Geneva, 10 December 2007 – The Group on Earth Observations (GEO) and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) signed a Memorandum of Understanding today aimed at strengthening cooperation on remote sensing of the Earth, particularly in the field of disaster preparedness and response.

Key benefits that this collaboration will provide to the global community include protection for the dedicated radio frequencies that remote-sensing satellites and Earth-based monitors use for gathering high-quality data on the global environment, the improved application of Earth observations to disaster management, and increased capacity building in developing countries for the effective use of Earth observations in decision-making.

“Efficient telecommunications services are fundamentally important to both the collection and dissemination of Earth observation data and information,” said José Achache, Director of the GEO secretariat. “The observation and telecommunications communities are natural partners, and by working more closely together we can strengthen the international response to disasters, environmental degradation and other global risks.”

Growing demand by the internet, cellular phone networks and other users of radio frequencies has raised the spectre of competition over limited bandwidth. However, last month’s ITU World Radiocommunication Conference in Geneva decided to maintain the existing bandwidth allocated to Earth observations. This will ensure the proper functioning of observation instruments by preventing other users of radio frequencies from unintentionally interfering with Earth observation applications, particularly satellite measurements.

Recognizing this, a Ministerial Summit organized by GEO on 30 November in South Africa adopted the Cape Town Declaration, which includes the statement: “We welcome the resolution of the World Radio Conference–07 on radio communication use for Earth observation applications and the support it provides for the international protection and long term availability of frequencies for terrestrial, oceanic, air-borne and space-based observations.”

GEO and the ITU share a commitment to reducing the loss of life and property from natural and human-induced disasters. When disaster looms, rapid access to weather forecasts, data on land and ocean conditions, maps of transport links and hospitals, and information on socio-economic variables can save uncounted lives. When integrated with other information, observations can help planners reduce vulnerability, strengthen preparedness and early-warning measures and, after disaster strikes, rebuild housing and infrastructure in ways that limit future risks.

The Cape Town Declaration therefore also recognized “the important contribution that GEO can make through collaboration with the International Telecommunication Union to promote, by the appropriate alerting authorities, the implementation of the international standard for all-media public warning across all disaster and emergency situations”.

“Reducing the impact of disasters requires strong coordination between telecommunications and Earth observations along the full chain of actions, from disaster preparedness to forecasts, warnings, crisis management, and recovery,” said Mr. Achache.

The two intergovernmental bodies are also active in the field of capacity building and aim to complement and reinforce each other’s efforts. Individuals need training on how to access and use Earth observation data and decision-support tools. Governments and institutions need long-term programmes that build their capacity to make decisions based on Earth observations, manage and protect natural resources and engage the private sector in these activities. Infrastructure investments are essential for upgrading and inter-linking hardware and software for acquiring, processing, interpreting and distributing observation data.

Two key infrastructure investments that illustrate the critical role of telecommunications in Earth observations are the China Brazil Earth Resources Satellite Programme (CBERS), which broadcasts observation free of charge directly to ground stations, and GEONETCast, a system of four communications satellites that transmits data to low-cost receivers maintained by users.

The Group on Earth Observations was established in 2005 after the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), the Group of Eight leading industrialized countries (G8) and three ministerial Earth Observation Summits all called for improving existing observation systems. It now boasts over 70 member countries and 46 participating organizations.

GEO is coordinating the construction of a Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS) that will link together diverse monitoring networks, instruments, data bases and models and other decision-support tools.

GEOSS addresses nine priorities of critical importance to the future of the human race. It aims to help us protect ourselves against natural and human-induced disasters, understand the environmental sources of health hazards, manage energy resources, respond to climate change and its impacts, safeguard freshwater resources, improve weather forecasts, manage ecosystems, promote sustainable agriculture, and conserve biodiversity.

Note to journalists: For more information, please see www.earthobservations.org or contact Michael Williams, GEO Secretariat, Geneva, at +41 22 730 8293 or mwilliams@geosec.org.