

A radio channel for life

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Rebels, ‘coupeurs de route’, ‘official’ barriers, malaria-friendly mosquitoes, tropical storms... These are a few of the challenges that humanitarian workers may find when they travel through this 4-million people country to assist the population in need. In 2008, 1,800 missions were carried out in the Central African Republic (CAR) by the UN system alone. Four coups in the last decade, regular economic crisis, scarcity of food resources, lack of basic health services but great natural resources are also part of the picture.

Michael Dirksen and Ekue Ayih from WFP IT (FITTEST) are two courageous relief workers in a 4-week mission to CAR to make sure that humanitarian workers can have access to a proper security communications network.

A FITTEST team already came last year to the country and established three Inter Agency radio rooms in Bossangoa, Kaga Bandoro and Paoua. This basically means that the humanitarian community has access to radio rooms operating 24 hours/day, 7 days/ week. Humanitarian workers travelling to these areas are tracked by the radio operators throughout the trip. At destination, they are contacted through the humanitarian channels at least once a day to know everyone’s position and to ensure that humanitarian workers are safe. This may seem just a normal UN procedure if you’re not familiar with the situation in CAR but for those working here in a permanent basis this may mean a passport to survival if things go really wrong.

‘In this mission, we’re going to upgrade the radio rooms in Bangui –the capital- and Ndele –a rebel controlled area in the north of the country where occasional combats have been happening these days-. We’ll need to wait for all the equipment to arrive to destination first and then we’ll start the trip to Ndele ourselves; we’ll have to consider around two days to arrive there by road’ - Michael explains.

After missions in Burundi, East Timor, Colombia and Guinea, CAR is not just another mission for Michael and he finds it very challenging to work in a country where so many elements are unpredictable.

‘Working in CAR is tough; standards are very different from what I’ve seen in other countries and planning becomes a daily battle’ - Michael explains while he eats a croissant for lunch. ‘There is not a canteen or a restaurant near the WFP office so we have to manage with whatever we bring to the office in the morning...’ - he says.

Bon appétit, Michael!

Marina