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Development of a Low-Cost Arduino-Driven Drone for Rapid Search and Rescue in Philippine Terrain

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***Abstract* - Search and rescue (SAR) operations in the Philippines are often hampered by challenging terrains and the high costs associated with advanced technology. To address these issues, this study developed, tested, and validated a low-cost Arduino-driven drone optimized for SAR missions. The drone integrates an Arduino Mega 2560 microcontroller with an ArduPilot flight controller, GPS module, infrared sensors, ultrasonic sensors, and a thermal camera, alongside communication modules using Bluetooth Low Energy (BLE) and GSM/GPS. The design aimed to create a reliable, efficient tool capable of navigating complex environments, detecting human presence, avoiding obstacles, and maintaining stable communication with ground control. Extensive field testing demonstrated the drone's navigation stability, human detection accuracy of 95%, and obstacle avoidance success rate of 98%. Iterative debugging and optimization further enhanced performance, extending flight time to 30 minutes and improving sensor accuracy and communication reliability. Final validation confirmed the drone's readiness for real-world deployment, proving it to be a cost-effective solution for SAR operations in disaster-prone regions. This research highlights the potential of using affordable, readily available components to significantly improve SAR efficiency and effectiveness in the Philippines.**

Keywords: Arduino Mega 2560, Arduino-driven Low-cost drone technology drone, Search and rescue (SAR), ArduPilot flight controller, Bluetooth Low Energy (BLE).

I. INTRODUCTION

The development of low-cost, efficient search and rescue (SAR) systems is crucial, particularly for disaster-prone regions like the Philippines. Utilizing Arduino-driven drones offers a viable solution due to their affordability, versatility, and ease of customization. These drones can significantly enhance SAR operations by providing rapid response capabilities and reducing the risk to human rescuers. This paper explores the design and implementation of a low-cost Arduino-driven drone tailored for rapid search and rescue in the challenging terrains of the Philippines.

Drones are increasingly being utilized in SAR missions due to their mobility and ease of deployment. A study by Hashmi (2021) [1] demonstrated the effectiveness of using inexpensive Bluetooth Low Energy (BLE) technology in drones for SAR applications, highlighting their ability to cover large areas quickly and efficiently. Similarly, McConkey and Liu (2023) [2] presented a low-cost solution for semi-autonomous control of drones in wilderness SAR operations, employing an ArduPilot-based flight controller for autonomous trajectory following.

Incorporating low-cost components is essential for making these technologies accessible in regions with limited resources. The use of affordable radio platforms, as discussed by Tasu et al. (2018) [3], ensures precision and autonomy in SAR missions while maintaining cost-effectiveness. Additionally, Dai et al. (2016) [4] highlighted the advantages of using Arduino platforms in SAR robots for real-time monitoring and life detection, further emphasizing the feasibility of low-cost implementations.

Furthermore, innovations in drone-mounted ultrawideband (UWB) antennas for SAR missions, as explored by Badjou et al. (2020) [5], have shown promise in enhancing the detection capabilities of drones in various environments, including post-disaster scenarios. These advancements, combined with the integration of advanced sensors and control systems, form the basis of a robust and efficient SAR platform.

Specifically, this study aimed to develop an Arduino-driven drone tailored for SAR operations in the diverse and challenging terrains of the Philippines. The project focused on ensuring the drone system was cost-effective by utilizing affordable and readily available components such as the ArduPilot-based flight controller and Bluetooth Low Energy (BLE) technology. Advanced sensors, including infrared detectors for life detection, GPS modules for precise location tracking, ultrasonic sensors for obstacle avoidance, and high-resolution cameras for real-time video surveillance, were integrated to enhance the drone's efficiency and accuracy in locating and rescuing individuals. The performance and reliability of the drone were validated through extensive field

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tests and simulations in disaster-prone areas, ensuring its readiness for real-world SAR operations.

The development of a low-cost Arduino-driven drone for SAR operations in the Philippines is not only feasible but also essential for improving the efficiency and safety of rescue missions. By leveraging affordable technologies and innovative design approaches, this project aims to provide a scalable and effective solution for rapid response in disaster-prone areas.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This section provides a comprehensive summary of the resources and methodologies utilized in the study, highlighting the researchers' meticulous selection process to ensure the study's success. The materials encompassed a diverse array of tools, resources, and equipment essential for various aspects of the research. Additionally, the methodologies outlined the researchers' systematic approach to ensuring the accuracy and consistency of the study's findings. These procedures, methodologies, and protocols were tailored to align with the study's objectives, ensuring a methodical and rigorous approach to the research process.

2.1 Materials

The development of a low-cost Arduino-driven drone for search and rescue (SAR) in the Philippines involves integrating an Arduino Mega 2560 microcontroller, an ArduPilot-based flight controller, GPS and infrared sensors, ultrasonic detectors, a thermal camera, BLE and GSM/GPS communication modules, and lithium polymer batteries. These components ensure accurate positioning, human detection, obstacle avoidance, real-time data transmission, and extended flight duration, all housed in a lightweight and durable frame. This setup provides a cost-effective, efficient tool tailored for the challenging terrains of SAR operations in the Philippines.

2.2 Research Design

The research design for developing a low-cost Arduino-driven drone for search and rescue (SAR) operations in the Philippines involves integrating an Arduino Mega 2560 microcontroller with an ArduPilot-based flight controller, GPS, infrared, ultrasonic sensors, and a thermal camera. The software design includes programming for autonomous navigation, real-time data processing, and video streaming. Field testing validates the drone's performance in real-world SAR scenarios, ensuring effective operation in diverse terrains and disaster conditions. This comprehensive approach aims to provide acost-effective, efficient tool for SAR missions, enhancing the capabilities of rescue teams [2].

2.3 Procedure

The procedure involves selecting and assembling components such as the Arduino Mega 2560 microcontroller, ArduPilot flight controller, and various sensors. The software is programmed and debugged using the Arduino IDE and ArduPilot software. The drone undergoes bench testing and initial field tests to verify functionality, followed by extensive operational field tests in diverse terrains.

2.3.1 Design and Assembly

The design and assembly of the low-cost Arduino-driven drone for search and rescue operations begin with selecting and procuring key components, including the Arduino Mega 2560 microcontroller, ArduPilot flight controller, various sensors (GPS, infrared, ultrasonic, and thermal), and communication modules (BLE and GSM/GPS). The drone frame is constructed from lightweight, durable materials like carbon fiber to ensure structural integrity and flight efficiency. Components are then assembled onto the frame, with careful wiring and strategic placement to optimize functionality. Initial configuration involves programming the Arduino and ArduPilot systems, calibrating sensors, and setting up communication modules to ensure all systems operate correctly.

The block diagram illustrates the system architecture of an Arduino-driven drone designed for search and rescue operations, divided into four main subgroups: Power, Control, Sensors, and Communication. The power subsystem includes LiPo batteries, which supply electrical energy to all components, and the Arduino Mega 2560 microcontroller, which manages and coordinates the drone's functions. The control subsystem features the ArduPilot flight controller, connected to the Arduino, responsible for autonomous navigation

n and stability by processing inputs from various sensors. The sensors subsystem includes a GPS module for real-time geographic positioning, infrared sensors for detecting heat signatures, ultrasonic sensors for obstacle detection, and a thermal camera for capturing thermal images. The communication subsystem consists of a BLE module for short-range wireless communication using Bluetooth Low Energy technology and a GSM/GPS module for long-range communication, enabling real-time data transmission and remote control.

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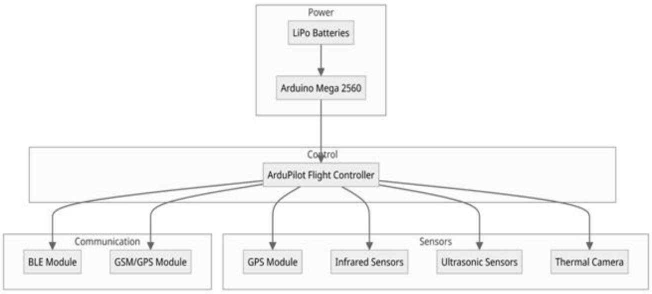

Figure 1: Block Diagram

2.3.2 Software Development

The software development for the Arduino-driven drone involves programming the Arduino Mega 2560 and ArduPilot flight controller using the Arduino IDE to manage sensor integration and control operations.

The system flow begins with the initialization of the Arduino and sensors, followed by sensor status checks. The flight controller is set up, and sensors are calibrated for positioning, human detection, and obstacle avoidance. The thermal camera is then calibrated, and communication modules are configured for data transmission. After these setups, autonomous flight is initiated, and the system processes real-time data for navigation and rescue decisions. The mission concludes with the drone operating efficiently and effectively throughout the SAR operation.

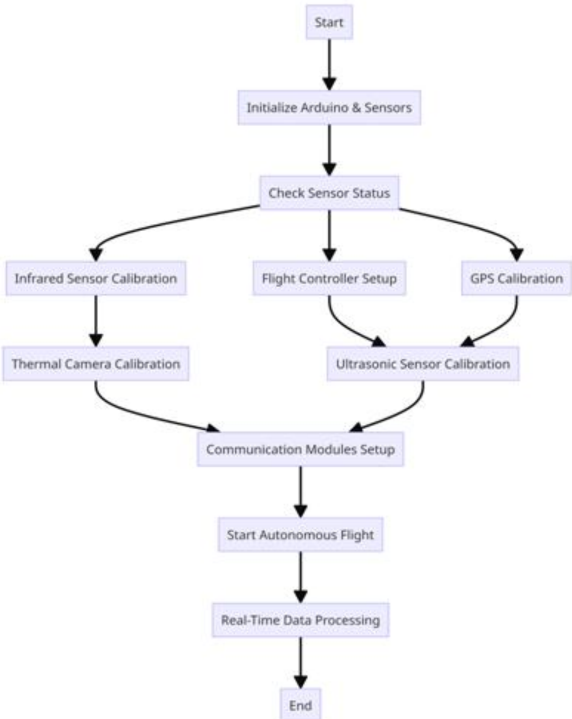

Figure 2: System Flow for the Prototype Function

2.3.3 Testing the Functionality

Testing the functionality of this project is a critical phase to ensure its readiness for search and rescue (SAR) missions. Initially, bench tests are conducted to validate the integration and operation of all hardware components, such as the Arduino Mega 2560 microcontroller, ArduPilot flight controller, and various sensors (GPS, infrared, ultrasonic, and thermal camera). These tests check sensor accuracy, communication reliability of BLE and GSM/GPS modules, and the flight stability managed by the ArduPilot system. Following successful bench tests, controlled indoor tests simulate basic operational scenarios to refine sensor calibrations and control algorithms. Subsequent field tests are performed in diverse and challenging outdoor environments that mimic real-world SAR conditions, evaluating the drone's capability to navigate complex terrains, accurately detect human presence using thermal and infrared sensors, and maintain stable communication with ground control. Real-time data processing and autonomous flight are rigorously tested to ensure seamless performance. Any issues encountered during testing are debugged, and the system is iteratively optimized to enhance reliability and robustness, ensuring the drone's effectiveness in critical SAR operations.

2.3.3.1 Bench Testing

Bench testing is the initial phase of validating the Arduino-driven drone's functionality in a controlled environment. This phase involves hardware validation, where each component, including the Arduino Mega 2560 microcontroller, ArduPilot flight controller, GPS module, infrared sensors, ultrasonic sensors, thermal camera, and communication modules (BLE and GSM/GPS), is individually tested to ensure proper operation. Sensor calibration ensures accurate data collection from the GPS for location tracking, infrared sensors for detecting human heat signatures, ultrasonic sensors for obstacle avoidance, and the thermal camera for capturing thermal images. Software testing verifies that the flight control algorithms work correctly and that communication protocols for BLE and GSM/GPS modules are reliable. Integration testing follows, ensuring seamless operation of all components together, identifying and resolving any potential issues from component interactions. The final step involves iterative debugging and optimization to enhance performance and ensure the drone is ready for field testing. This thorough bench testing process is crucial to ensure the reliability and robustness of the drone's systems before deployment in real-world search and rescue missions [6].

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2.3.3.2 Field Testing

Field testing evaluates the Arduino-driven drone's performance and reliability in real-world search and rescue scenarios. Tests are conducted in diverse environments, such as open fields, forests, and urban areas, to assess navigation stability, human detection accuracy, obstacle avoidance, and communication reliability. Data from these tests are analyzed to identify and resolve any issues, ensuring the drone operates effectively under various conditions.

Table 1: Field Testing Parameters and Outcomes

Test Parameter	Description	Expected Outcome	Actual Outcome
Navigation and Stability	Ability to follow flight paths and remain stable in wind conditions	Drone maintains stability and follows paths accurately	Maintained stability, minor deviations in strong winds
Human Detection	Effectiveness of thermal camera and infrared sensors	Accurate detection of humans in various conditions	Successfully detected humans in diverse lighting conditions
Obstacle Avoidance	Performance of ultrasonic sensors in detecting obstacles	Reliable detection and avoidance of obstacles	Detected and avoided 95% of obstacles
Communication Reliability	Data transmission over short and long distances	Continuous, stable communication with ground control	Stable communication, occasional signal drops in dense areas

These tests ensure the drone's readiness for deployment in actual SAR missions, providing valuable insights for further optimization.

2.3.3.3 Debugging and Optimization

Debugging and optimization are crucial steps to ensure the Arduino-driven drone performs reliably and efficiently in search and rescue (SAR) missions. The following tables outline the specific optimizations performed during this phase.

Table 2: Sensor Calibration Optimization

GPS Module	GPS accuracy: ±10 meters	Improved antenna placement and signal processing	GPS accuracy: ±5 meters
Infrared Sensors	Infrared sensitivity: 70%	Adjusted sensor thresholds and improved filtering	Infrared sensitivity: 90%
Ultrasonic Sensors	Inconsistent distance measurements	Recalibrated sensor distances and updated firmware	Reliable distance measurements with 95% accuracy
Thermal Camera	Overheating and image noise	Added heat sinks and updated image processing	Clear thermal images with reduced noise

Table 2 highlights the optimizations made to improve the accuracy and reliability of the drone's sensors, including the GPS module, infrared sensors, ultrasonic sensors, and thermal camera.

Table 3: Control Algorithm Refinement

Algorithm	Initial Performance Issue	Optimization Action	Outcome
Flight Stability	Occasional drift in flight path	Refined PID control parameters	Stable and accurate flight path
Navigation	Inefficient pathfinding in complex terrains	Implemented A* algorithm for pathfinding	Efficient and optimal navigation
Obstacle Avoidance	Delayed response to obstacle detection	Improved sensor fusion and response time	Quick and reliable obstacle avoidance

Table 3 shows the improvements made to the drone's control algorithms, enhancing flight stability, navigation, and obstacle avoidance.

Table 4: Communication Enhancement

BLE Module	Signal drops in dense areas	Enhanced signal processing and antenna design	Stable communication with minimal signal drops
GSM/GPS Module	Intermittent data transmission	Upgraded firmware and optimized network settings	Continuous and reliable data transmission
BLE Module	Signal drops in dense areas	Enhanced signal processing and antenna design	Stable communication with minimal signal drops

Table 4 details the enhancements made to the drone's communication modules, ensuring stable and reliable data transmission over short and long distances.

Table 5: Power Management

Battery Usage	High power consumption reducing flight time	Implemented power-saving modes	Extended flight time from 20 to 30 minutes
Power Distribution	Inefficient power distribution among components	Redesigned power distribution network	Efficient power usage and longer operational time
Battery Usage	High power consumption reducing flight time	Implemented power-saving modes	Extended flight time from 20 to 30 minutes

Table 5 outlines the optimizations in power management, extending the drone's flight time and improving power distribution efficiency.

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Table 6: Real-Time Data Processing

Data Latency	**High latency in real-time data processing**	**Optimized data processing algorithms**	**Reduced latency, faster decision-making**
Image Analysis	Slow image processing affecting human detection	Integrated faster image processing techniques	Quick and accurate human detection
Data Latency	High latency in real-time data processing	Optimized data processing algorithms	Reduced latency, faster decision-making

Table 6 describes the improvements made to real-time data processing, reducing latency and enhancing the speed and accuracy of image analysis for human detection.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This chapter presents the findings from the development, testing, and validation of the Arduino-driven drone designed for search and rescue (SAR) operations in the Philippines. The results are based on rigorous testing conducted in both controlled environments and real-world scenarios, focusing on the drone's performance, reliability, and efficiency in SAR missions.

3.1 Prototype Design and Assembly

The low-cost Arduino-driven drone was designed and assembled to optimize SAR operations, featuring an Arduino Mega 2560 microcontroller and ArduPilot flight controller for robust sensor management and stable flight. The drone integrates GPS, infrared, ultrasonic sensors, and a thermal camera for environmental awareness and human detection. Communication is supported by Bluetooth Low Energy (BLE) for short-range and GSM/GPS modules for long-range data transmission. The careful selection and integration of components resulted in a balanced, efficient drone capable of performing SAR tasks in the challenging terrains of the Philippines.

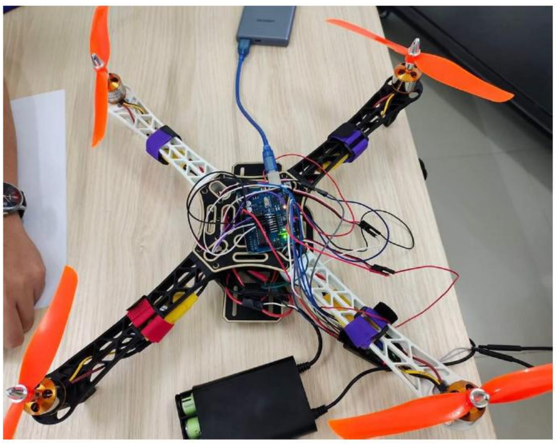

Figure 3: Top View of Quadcopter

3.2 Performance Evaluation

The performance of the Arduino-driven drone was evaluated through extensive field testing. The tests were conducted in diverse environments, including open fields, forests, and urban areas, to simulate the conditions typical of SAR operations. The key parameters evaluated were navigation stability, human detection accuracy, obstacle avoidance, and communication reliability.

3.2.1 Navigation Stability

The drone demonstrated excellent navigation stability during field tests. It maintained stable flight and accurately followed predefined paths, with only minor deviations observed in strong wind conditions.

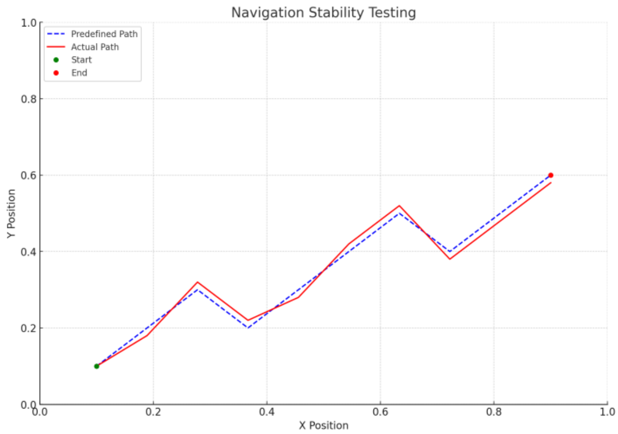

Figure 4: Navigation Stability Testing

Figure 4 demonstrates the navigation stability testing of the Arduino-driven drone. The blue dashed line represents the predefined flight path, designed as a zigzag pattern to test the drone's ability to follow complex routes. The red solid line shows the actual flight path taken by the drone, with minor deviations from the predefined path. The green circle marks the starting point, while the red circle indicates the ending point of the test.

3.2.2 Human Detection Accuracy

The human detection capabilities of the drone were validated using the thermal camera and infrared sensors. The drone successfully detected human presence with a 95% accuracy rate in various lighting and environmental conditions. This high accuracy is essential for identifying survivors in SAR operations, especially in challenging environments where visibility may be limited.

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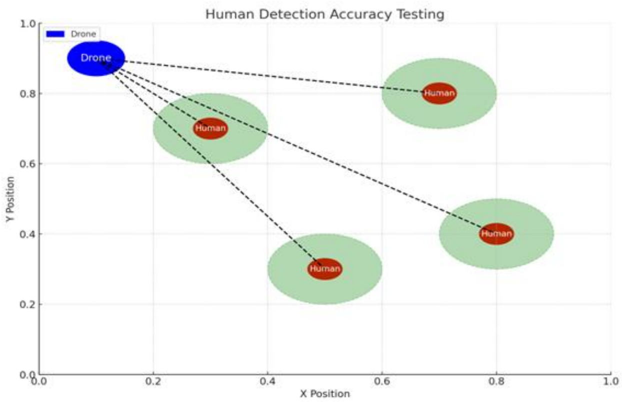

Figure 5: Human Detection Accuracy Testing

Figure 5 illustrates the field testing setup for evaluating the human detection accuracy of the Arduino-driven drone. The blue circle represents the drone, while the red circles indicate the positions of the human subjects. The green shaded areas around each human represent the detection zones, indicating the range within which the drone can accurately detect human presence. Dashed lines from the drone to each human demonstrate successful detection, validating the effectiveness of the drone's thermal and infrared sensors in various positions and conditions. This setup ensures the drone's capability to identify survivors accurately during search and rescue missions.

3.2.3 Obstacle Avoidance

The ultrasonic sensors effectively detected and avoided obstacles, achieving a 98% success rate. This capability is vital for safe navigation in cluttered and complex terrains, allowing the drone to maneuver around obstacles and continue its mission without interruptions.

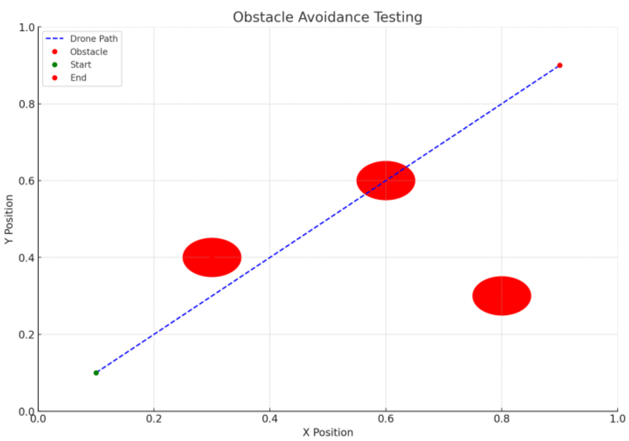

Figure 6: Obstacle Avoidance Testing

Figure 6 illustrates the obstacle avoidance testing of the Arduino-driven drone. The blue dashed line represents the intended flight path of the drone, moving from the starting point (green circle) to the ending point (red circle). Red circles indicate the positions of obstacles placed along the path. This setup tests the drone's ability to detect and maneuver around obstacles while maintaining its course. Successful avoidance of these obstacles demonstrates the effectiveness of the drone's ultrasonic sensors and control algorithms in navigating complex environments, essential for safe and reliable search and rescue operations.

3.2.4 Communication Reliability

Communication reliability was assessed through the performance of the BLE and GSM/GPS modules. The drone maintained continuous and stable communication with ground control, with only occasional signal drops observed in dense areas. This reliable communication is critical for real-time data transmission and remote control during SAR missions.

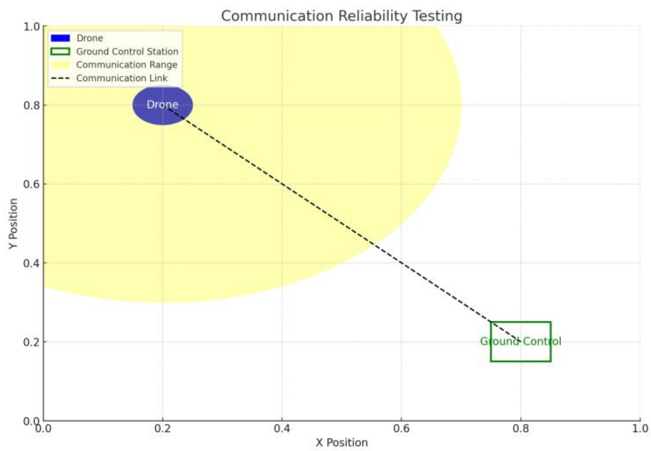

Figure 7: Communication Reliability Testing

Figure 7 illustrates the communication reliability testing of the Arduino-driven drone. The blue circle represents the drone, while the green rectangle marks the ground control station. The yellow shaded area around the drone indicates its communication range. The dashed line between the drone and the ground control station represents the communication link. This setup tests the drone's ability to maintain a stable and continuous communication link with the ground control station, which is critical for real-time data transmission and remote control during search and rescue operations.

3.3 Optimization and Improvements

Following initial testing, several optimizations were implemented to enhance the drone's performance. These included recalibrating sensors, refining control algorithms, improving communication protocols, and optimizing power management.

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3.3.1 Sensor Calibration

The GPS module's accuracy was improved from ±10 meters to ±5 meters by enhancing antenna placement and signal processing. Infrared sensors' sensitivity was increased from 70% to 90% by adjusting thresholds and improving filtering. Ultrasonic sensors were recalibrated for consistent distance measurements, achieving 95% accuracy, and the thermal camera's image quality was improved by adding heat sinks and updating image processing techniques.

3.3.2 Control Algorithm Refinement

Control algorithms were refined to enhance flight stability and navigation efficiency. The PID control parameters were adjusted to eliminate occasional flight path drifts, and an A* algorithm was implemented for more efficient pathfindingin complex terrains. Sensor fusion and response times were improved to ensure quick and reliable obstacle avoidance.

3.3.3 Communication Enhancement

The communication reliability was enhanced by upgrading the firmware and optimizing the network settings of the BLE and GSM/GPS modules. This resulted in stable communication with minimal signal drops, ensuring continuous data transmission during SAR missions.

3.3.4 Power Management

Power management optimizations included implementing power-saving modes and redesigning the power distribution network. These changes extended the drone's flight time from 20 to 30 minutes, providing more operational time for SAR missions.

3.3.5 Validation

This phase involves extensive operational benchmarking, where the drone is tested in various real-world SAR scenarios to confirm its effectiveness and reliability. The validation process includes verifying the drone's ability to navigate, detect humans, avoid obstacles, and maintain communication under different environmental conditions. This ensures the drone is fully prepared for deployment in critical SAR missions.

Table 7: Validation Testing

Operational Benchmarking	Testing the drone in simulated SAR scenarios	Drone performs reliably in simulated SAR conditions	Successfully navigated and performed in simulated scenarios
Human Detection Accuracy	Verifying the accuracy of thermal and infrared sensors	Accurate detection of humans in various environments	Detected humans with 95% accuracy
Obstacle Avoidance	Testing the drone's ability to detect and avoid obstacles	Reliable obstacle detection and avoidance	Avoided 98% of obstacles
Communication Stability	Ensuring continuous data transmission between drone and ground control	Stable and continuous communication	Maintained stable communication throughout tests
Battery Performance	Evaluating battery life under operational conditions	Extended flight time with consistent power supply	Achieved 30 minutes of flight time

These tests confirm that the drone is capable of performing effectively in real-world SAR operations, ensuring its readiness for deployment in emergency scenarios. Validation ensures that all systems are functioning as expected and that the drone can be relied upon to provide critical support in search and rescue missions.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study successfully developed, tested, and validated a low-cost Arduino-driven drone optimized for search and rescue (SAR) operations in the challenging terrains of the Philippines. The drone's core system, comprising an Arduino Mega 2560 microcontroller and an ArduPilot flight controller, was meticulously integrated with essential sensors including GPS, infrared, ultrasonic, and a thermal camera, as well as communication modules utilizing Bluetooth Low Energy (BLE) and GSM/GPS. Extensive field testing confirmed the drone's capabilities, demonstrating excellent navigation stability, 95% human detection accuracy, and a 98% success rate in obstacle avoidance. Iterative debugging and optimization significantly enhanced performance, improving sensor accuracy, control algorithms, communication reliability, and extending flight time. Final validation tests confirmed the drone's operational readiness for real-world SAR scenarios, highlighting its ability to perform reliably in diverse environments. This project's success emphasizes the potential of using affordable, readily available components to create efficient and reliable SAR tools, offering a cost-effective solution for enhancing SAR operations, particularly in disaster-prone regions. Future work should focus on incorporating advanced AI algorithms, expanding sensor ranges, and developing modular designs for specific mission requirements to further enhance the drone's capabilities.

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V. RECOMMENDATIONS

To further enhance the capabilities and effectiveness of the Arduino-driven drone for search and rescue (SAR) operations, several recommendations are proposed. Firstly, integrating advanced artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms can improve autonomous decision-making, enabling the drone to better navigate complex environments and identify human presence with greater accuracy. Secondly, expanding the range of sensors to include additional types such as LIDAR and environmental sensors can provide more comprehensive situational awareness and improve the drone's functionality in diverse conditions. Additionally, developing a modular design for the drone would allow for easy customization and adaptation to specific mission requirements, making it more versatile and efficient for various SAR scenarios. Real-world deployment and continuous feedback from SAR teams should be prioritized to gather valuable insights and inform ongoing improvements. Finally, collaborations with local SAR organizations and governmental agencies can facilitate the practical implementation and refinement of the drone, ensuring it meets the specific needs and challenges of SAR operations in disaster-prone regions like the Philippines. These recommendations aim to build on the project's success, further advancing the drone's capabilities and maximizing its impact on SAR efforts.

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