

Hostilities Create Dire Environment for Christians Seeking Shelter

Missionaries native to Ukraine are risking their lives to bring life-saving aid to civilians as violations of a cease-fire add to the nearly 7,000 people who have perished.

A cease-fire signed in February between Russian-backed separatists and Ukrainian forces has been crumbling fast in the past week as troops on both sides have reported casualties. The February agreement followed the breakdown of a prior cease-fire signed in September 2014. The United Nations estimates more than 6,800 people, both civilians and troops, have been killed since April 2014, with 17,100 wounded.

Untold misery continues to unfold in a conflict little understood in the West. Preceding the battles was the collapse in February 2014 of the Ukrainian government as protests mounted. Demonstrators raged at the government's decision, under pressure from Russia, to forego a trade pact that would have drawn Ukraine closer to the European Union. Protesters were further incensed at the subsequent acceptance of a major loan from Russia.

Amid the unrest, Russia on March 18, 2014, annexed the Ukrainian region of Crimea. At the same time, pro-Russian demonstrations in eastern Ukraine escalated into an armed insurgency, and an indeterminate number of Russian paramilitaries have since joined the Russian citizens in eastern Ukraine who launched the rebellion.

Since the fighting in eastern Ukraine started last year, an estimated 1.4 million people have been forced to flee their homes. Starvation and disease took the lives of many who fled bullets and bombs, according to a Ukraine-born, Christian

leader overseeing organizations ministering in the conflict zones.

“Those too frightened to escape the war-ravaged towns and villages because they believed they couldn’t make it past the bullets, artillery and bomb explosions sought shelter in the basements of homes and apartment buildings,” he said. “Their ‘refuge’ had no food or water, no medicine, no heat during the cold Ukrainian winter and no sanitary facilities.”

In combat areas in eastern Ukraine, heavy artillery has been used in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions in spite of the cease-fire signed in the Belarus capital of Minsk. As many as 400 pro-Russian separatists attacked Ukrainian forces over the weekend (Aug. 8-9) with the aid of 10 tanks and 10 armored personnel carriers, according to a government spokesman.

Many stores are closed, making it difficult to buy staple items such as bread, and travel is dangerous. The indigenous missionaries that Christian Aid Mission assists said they have the know-how and contacts to overcome the obstacles of war to get aid to people.

“Every week we send out food parcels and clothing to different locations in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions where people are unable to leave the territory,” a local ministry director said. “Food delivery capability is very limited, as there are only seven corridors through which humanitarian supplies may be delivered. Many people are in need of food.”

The ministry has established mobile kitchens in tents where people are fed. Three such tents are in place in Donetsk, two in Lugansk, and one each in Makiyevka, Krasnodon, Rubizhne and Yenakievo. Each day, up to 1,000 people receive food, the ministry director said.

“All these people hear the testimony of Jesus Christ,” he said. “They are offered the opportunity to repeat a prayer of repentance. According to the pastors, no one refuses

to repent.”

The daily cost of feeding one person per day is 70 cents. The ministry also provides clothes and toiletries, but great needs for pharmaceutical items remain.

The hostilities have not only caused businesses to close their doors, but several other aspects of society have ceased to function. Pensioners have not received their pensions, and students have been unable to study. Where food is available, prices have skyrocketed. All these problems have led to a steep increase in crime.

Displaced families are settling wherever they can; some have been directed toward orphanages, while churches are making their basements, pews and any other space available.

“We await the arrival of 23 more boys and girls who have lost families/caregivers,” the director of one ministry recently wrote.

Ministries based in Ukraine seek to expand aid to meet the growing needs of the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) and those who have no way of leaving conflict areas. In the expanded plan, crucial medications, diapers, baby formula, personal hygiene items and warm clothing would be distributed, along with food, water and temporary shelter.

“This kind of help is expected to continue for an indefinite time,” the Christian leader from the region said. “Secondly, the multifaceted social implications of such a crisis situation will also be addressed. Longstanding outreach programs will play a vital role in the rehabilitation of fractured lives.”

Local Christian workers from indigenous ministries who have proven ability to extend aid in Christ’s name would build upon existing programs in the effort to expand. Ukraine has a network of churches, ministries (including orphanages) and

volunteers in place, all working together to provide critical help.

“Volunteers, church workers, and the IDPs themselves are working together to restore abandoned buildings to house the homeless,” a ministry director said. “Overall, the efforts have been successful, but there are concerns about sufficient funding to sustain these projects over longer periods of time—six months or more—and about funding for programs in those areas where no help has yet been given.”

Proposed “Temporary Accommodations Centers” would house 70 people at sites to be constructed or renovated for 14 to 18 families. Once housed in renovated old houses or abandoned buildings, adults would be assisted with finding new jobs and their children enrolled in area schools.

Since the military conflict began, ministries assisted by Christian Aid have helped more than 10,000 people, the Christian leader said. The indigenous missionaries seek to expand their work for six months at a cost of \$1 million.

“We are so grateful to everyone who helps us make this possible,” the Christian leader said. “Your gift helps to save souls daily.”