

Peril on the Border: Protecting the Child Victims of the Ukrainian Invasion

More than 11 million Ukrainians have been forced from their homes in the eight weeks since Vladimir Putin launched his invasion of Ukraine. More than five million of them have crossed the borders into Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania.

More than half of these refugees are children, tens of thousands of them unaccompanied minors vulnerable to sex traffickers.

We are in constant contact with people ministering to the refugees on the border. One of them recently reported that traffickers approach her every day attempting to sell children to her. In three days, she rescued twelve children from the traffickers. These children are now safe, sheltered and fed.

Vladimir Putin's war has ripped through Ukraine like a tornado. It has also become an unparalleled opportunity for sex traffickers.

When the Russians invaded Ukraine in 2014, traffickers had a field day in the refugee camps of Eastern Ukraine. Many of the young women in the brothels of Paris, Amsterdam, Antwerp and Madrid were teenagers when traffickers kidnapped them or lured them with promises of a better life. They were particularly vulnerable because they did not have a family network to protect them.

This pattern is being repeated in the cities and villages on Ukraine's border. Uzhgorod, Ukraine, has been a transit point for traffickers since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, a veritable bazaar for pimps and kidnappers.

Unaccompanied minors present them with new and lucrative opportunities.

Providing food and shelter to the refugees is critical at this time. Some parents, exhausted by weeks of Russian bombardments and sleeplessness, worn out by days of travel to the border, and in some cases, with nowhere to stay, hand over their children to seemingly well-intentioned people offering to help.

We can help these vulnerable girls and boys. Scores of ministries and international organizations work on the Ukrainian border to care for the victims of this war. We need to provide them with the resources they need to make sure these displaced children do not fall into the hands of the predators.

We also need to pray that God will speak to the people ministering on the front lines to take these children into their hearts. Most of the people ministering on the border were not involved in anti-trafficking efforts before the war. In a matter of days, they became relief workers face to face with thousands of women and children fleeing imminent danger and traffickers attempting to enslave them. What had been a vague social justice issue that was not their calling suddenly became an emergency.

Jesus provides us with the model for our response to the children of this crisis. On several occasions, parents brought their children to Jesus to receive His blessing. Our Lord's disciples shooed them away.

It seemed like a waste of time for Messiah to take time to take children on His lap to bless them. Historical evidence indicates that half of those children died of sickness, disease or malnutrition by age 5.

Jesus rebuked His disciples and said, "Don't stop them from coming to Me, for such is the kingdom of heaven" (Ssee Matt.

19:14.)

Our Lord shared a story with His disciples just before His crucifixion about how they were to live before His second coming. He told them that at the end of time, God will divide the world's people into two groups – the sheep and the goats. How will God determine where people belong? By whether or not they showed mercy to the hungry, the sick, the prisoner and the homeless. Then Jesus delivered the punchline: "For as you have done to the least of these, you have done to Me" (see Matt. 25:40.)

Jesus said clearly and directly that mercy is the measure of our relationship with Him. If that is true, then we must take the children of this war to heart and wrap our arms around them. {eoa}

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