

Canadians helping Ukrainians caught in forgotten war

Ceasefires in Ukraine aren't quite ceasefires.

Despite a halt to fighting declared on July 27, the shooting has continued, and Caritas – the international federation of 165 Catholic aid organizations – carries on feeding and serving the poor caught in the crossfire.

The six-year-old war between Ukraine and Russian-backed forces in the eastern Donbass region has killed over 13,000, including about 4,000 civilians. More than 30,000 have been wounded and nearly 1.5 million are internally displaced. The war stalemated long before this latest of about a dozen failed ceasefires and it was forgotten in Western media even before that.

“With time, media fatigue forms. That's obvious,” said Catholic Near East Welfare Association project officer Anna Dombrovska.

Between July 27 and Aug. 4, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's special monitoring mission in Ukraine recorded 251 ceasefire violations, including three on Aug. 4.

Basically, nothing has changed for hundreds of thousands of internally displaced Ukrainians who rely on Caritas and CNEWA for food and basic health care, Dombrovska said.

CNEWA finances two Caritas projects on the edge of the war zone. In the small city of Mariupol – on the shores of the Azov Sea, just over one-and-a-half hours' drive south of Donetsk – Caritas runs a soup kitchen. Like soup kitchens around the world, it has switched to takeout meals under the shadow of COVID-19.

It costs nearly \$80,000 a year to keep the soup kitchen open, of which CNEWA's Canadian donors have contributed nearly \$10,000 this year. The soup kitchen serves the poorest among over 100,000 internally displaced people in a city of half-a-million.

“It feeds people who just don't have enough funds to survive,” said Dombrovska.

In Kramatorsk, two hours drive north of Donetsk, Caritas uses CNEWA funds to operate home care services for the disabled – mostly seniors but many of them wounded in rounds of indiscriminate shelling and outbreaks of rifle fire.

“They (Caritas) help them to basically live. They bring them food. They cook for them. They take care of their hygiene,” Dombrovska said.

CNEWA's Canadian donors have contributed over \$33,000 this year to keep the Kramatorsk home care service up and running.

Neither the weakened state of Ukraine nor the Russian-backed self-proclaimed state of the Donetsk People's Republic can offer the basic care Caritas performs, according to Dombrovska.

In non-COVID years she visits CNEWA's Ukraine projects regularly. Without the support of the Church, there are no public services to fall back on in either Mariupol or Kramatorsk, she said.

"Those people need every-day support. It's difficult to imagine what will happen (without the Caritas projects)," she said.

Though Caritas in Ukraine is attached to the Greek Catholic Church, its services are offered to all Ukrainians including the Orthodox of the Kyiv Patriarchate and Orthodox of the Moscow Patriarchate. Eastern-rite Catholics represent just 10 per cent of Ukrainians, though the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church worldwide is the largest Eastern-rite Catholic Church.

"All those small villages that live right next to the war, where the shelling is happening, this is where Caritas Ukraine is present," said Dombrovska.

Ukrainians are attracted to social services offered in the context of faith.

"What they say is that the war changes people from unbelievers to believers," Dombrovska said. "If you are on this edge of whether you live or you die, or you're in constant, constant stress and constant fear, this is when you start to understand that there is God and no one else will help you."

It's been a tough year for Ukrainians, whose health system was unprepared for COVID-19, who saw a civilian airliner with 176 people on board shot down in Iran and have worried over wildfires erupting in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, where radiation from the 1986 meltdown at the old nuclear power plant still reads 16 times above normal.

On top of that, in June there were floods and landslides in the Carpathian Mountains that hit 300 villages and towns.

While not forgetting the war in the eastern region of the country, CNEWA has begun raising funds to help 15,000 households struggling in the wake of the Carpathian Mountain floods.

Climate change is obviously the cause of this year's flooding in the Carpathians, said His Beatitude Sviatoslav Shevchuk, head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church.

"The cause of this disaster that we are experiencing is this predatory attitude of humans towards the environment. Climate change on a global scale and

uncontrolled destruction of Carpathian forests forced nature to raise its menacing voice, before which we cannot remain silent," Sviataslov wrote in a June 25 letter to Ukrainian Catholics.