

Protection

for people fleeing from Ukraine

Humanitarian protection of vulnerable groups must be at the center of every humanitarian intervention. In armed conflict, women and children face increased vulnerabilities that need to be considered. This is especially relevant in the Ukraine war, as they make up the largest number of people seeking refuge. **UNHCR expects up to 4 Mio. refugees** leaving Ukraine. We know that by now half of the displaced people are minors, many of them unaccompanied. There is a high number of children, especially girls, living in some form of residential care facility in Ukraine. The second highest group of refugees is women. Other vulnerable groups are people with disabilities, elderly people, people of different nationalities trying to leave Ukraine which do not fall under refugee protection, but also men: deserters from both sides are under high pressure.

The ADRA network is active with an emergency response team in different border areas of neighbouring countries as

well as inside Ukraine. We have essential knowledge in the areas of humanitarian aid due to decades of worldwide engagement. With every day that passes, we watch women and children being increasingly affected by the escalating war. ADRA observes women crossing the border to Poland and other neighbouring countries taking care of not only themselves, but their children and elderly people with impressive strength, courage, and solidarity towards each other. Fully packed with luggage and children in their arms, we hear them asking “What can I do, where can I work?” Additionally to finding themselves in vulnerable positions, women are also denied the means to break out of the situation. The response to this crisis needs to keep needs and challenges of women and children as the primary focus and provide adequate assistance. **We call for increased protection of women and children and their safe passage in this conflict.**

The global humanitarian community knows of various cases of **violence and human**



trafficking at the borders, many of these incidents fall under gender-based violence. Even though improvement has been made when it comes to security – for example at the Polish border, where armed groups are currently protecting and guarding refugees on their way to the reception centres – criminals find other means. Many refugees lack knowledge on safe passage and undergo potential risks while crossing the border; lack of language competence on all sides is also an issue. Pick-up services masked as genuine help can turn ugly. There is close to no monitoring who drives to the border (as private initiatives) and picks up refugees. Generally, there is an issue with registration, due to fear, lack of information and insufficient structured guidance for people in need. Even though registration is encouraged, there is currently no legal requirement for Ukrainian nationals to register in Schengen countries. This fact hinders coordinated protection measures. Humanitarians and state actors are facing difficulties identifying individuals, ensuring family reunification as well sharing information on protection.

Crossing the border is becoming increasingly traumatising: waiting lines are long, train rides take place in inhumane conditions. Even though the temporary protection due to mass influx of people fleeing Ukraine has been implemented on 4 March 2022 to ensure harmonized rights, the movement across borders does not happen smoothly. There have been cases of long waiting hours out in the cold,

at night - close to minus temperatures - without warm shelter, food, water or any other kind of aid. Documentation of refugees takes a very long time, where every document is checked at every border crossing and biometric pictures are taken of the refugees. This calls for more policy coherence and harmonized action between the countries, to minimize the waiting and ensure safe and smooth passage to refuge.

There is also an increasing number of people being displaced within Ukraine. 1,9 Million people have been internally displaced by the conflict, as UN OCHA is estimating. Internal displacement often occurs under lack of community service, broken infrastructure, physical and mental trauma, loss and therefore decreased resilience. Limited mobility prevents many from fleeing, such as elderly and caregivers.

The time and context before crossing the border plays a huge role in how far-reaching vulnerabilities and needed support turns out to be. Additionally, the next waves of refugees crossing to Western neighbouring countries are expected to have less resources as well as less social contacts, which means they face even higher vulnerabilities. It is not foreseeable how and when this conflict will end; desperation to leave and the chaotic run to safety might very well increase. It is clear that refugees crossing the border are in need of specific psychosocial support catering to war trauma and gender-based violence.



What is needed next?

Systematic registration has not been realized by now. Stuck between a repressive regime and country of war on one side, and an insecure future and potential new dangers on the other side, it is absolutely essential to efficiently set up safe passages, distribute adequate legal information in target languages, share the location of info points, psychosocial, medical and legal aid, accommodation, and the guarantee for refugees that registration is under highest data protection and will not have negative effects of their personal safety and right to move. Refugees need to know their rights and where to gain more information.

Setting up a legal aid system is priority to ensure human rights. We call for political coherence in documentation at border crossings, so that procedures happen once, and not at every border through multi-country travels. Safe passageways need to be ensured. If waiting times occur at border crossings, there has

to be the guarantee of warm shelter, food, medical aid and transparent communication with the refugees about what steps are currently being taken. Local authorities need to understand protection measures and needs of the vulnerabilities that people face.

Next to specific basic needs such as childcare, medical attention and nutrition, there is an increased need for **Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS)**. Preservation and improvement psychosocial well-being will be the basis of mental health and decrease generational trauma. Peace always starts in people's minds.

We suggest a focus on employing **female staff** to support official and civil activities in border regions. This can ensure protection measures especially for the most vulnerable, which are women and children in this context, and promote gender sensitivity. ■

About ADRA

The Adventist Development and Relief Agency is the international humanitarian arm of the Seventh-day Adventist Church serving in 118 countries. Its work empowers communities and changes lives around the globe by providing sustainable community development and disaster relief. For more information, visit www.ADRA.org and **see prior statement on Ukraine Crisis** <https://adventistreview.org/release/hands-of-hope/>.

