

**AT THE FRONT LINES OF CONFLICT:
AN EMERGENCY APPEAL FOR MARIUPOL, UKRAINE**

Christian hope, nourished by the light of Christ, makes the resurrection and life shine even in the darkest nights of the world.

I carry you in my heart and I pray for you, dear Ukrainian Brothers.¹

– Pope Francis

The world is watching as satellite imagery reveals an unprecedented massing of troops — estimated at 90,000 — forces gathering near Russia’s border with Ukraine, as well as an influx of tanks, artillery and snipers. Analysts anticipate that Ukrainian military units deployed to protect its eastern border could be overrun in minutes rather than days or weeks. Diplomats are scurrying to the region to avert a full-on assault.

Further from the spotlight, but close to our hearts, are the Ukrainian people, who, just miles from the military buildup, confront unimaginable hardship and peril. In 2014, Russian-backed militias attacked and occupied large swathes of territory in the oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk in eastern Ukraine, while Russian forces invaded and annexed Crimea in the south. Media and human rights organizations report pro-Russian forces in eastern Ukraine have abducted and beaten civilians, including Greek Catholic priests. The occupations have separated families, decimated industries and destroyed lives. An estimated 10,000 people, including thousands of civilians, have been killed in the conflicts.



Those Ukrainians living in government-controlled areas of eastern Ukraine have borne the brunt of the conflict, while bracing for more. An estimated 1.4 million people remain displaced within Ukraine, one of the largest such populations in the world. A large percentage have settled along the frontline in Eastern Ukraine, with more than 500,000 displaced living in the Donetsk oblast alone. An estimated 30 to 50 percent of the displaced are elderly or disabled.

According to the United Nations, two million people in this region inhabit territory covered by mines, the fifth largest such area in the world. Explosive devices have killed or maimed 2,000 Ukrainian civilians. Meanwhile, the landmines impede the cultivation of agriculture. The United Nations also reports that shelling, which has continued sporadically despite ceasefires in 2015 and 2020, has damaged water systems serving up to 4.2 million people.

On 8 December, the United States International Agency for Development (USAID) warned that 1.8 million people in eastern Ukraine are in dire need of humanitarian assistance. The country is struggling with a surge in Coronavirus infections. Nationwide, an estimated 84 percent of households have lost income due to the economic downturn that followed the pandemic. The United Nations estimates some 400,000 people living in government-controlled areas of eastern Ukraine are currently food insecure.

Mounting insecurity in the region and a surge of Russian troops along the border have brought new obstacles and risks to humanitarian operations. Russian authorities have constructed a land bridge at the Kerch Strait, connecting the Black Sea to the Sea of Azov, which they regularly use to intercept ships as they cross. Few international programs operate where help is needed most.

*Take to heart the grave humanitarian situation facing the population.
The weakest and the smallest pay the highest price.²*

– Pope Francis

Heeding the call to action, CNEWA and its partner Caritas Mariupol, seek funding to launch an emergency food assistance program in Mariupol, Ukraine, the second largest city in Donetsk oblast, just 12 miles away from the conflict zone. Its population is at the eye of the storm. In 2014 the city was occupied by separatist for several months, and in 2015 it suffered 154 rocket attacks against civilian targets in one day.

There, the sole focus of Caritas Mariupol is to serve and protect the most vulnerable of this at-risk population. The city department of social services will grant Caritas Mariupol access to its database of residents who live below the poverty line. Staff will work with city authorities to identify and contact the poorest among them. The organization will prioritize individuals who are living in poverty and suffer medical conditions, unemployment, homelessness or displacement due to the armed conflict. Access to government records will enable the organization to assist individuals across all religions, backgrounds and ethnicities with the most pressing, humanitarian needs.

Caritas Mariupol, which has a staff of 60 employees and 30 volunteers, belongs to the worldwide Catholic confederation of Caritas International organizations. Its program will serve more than 11,000 meals from January to May 2022, fully covering the winter months. It will select the beneficiaries from 2 to 16 January. The canteen will begin serving hot meals starting on 17 January to 80 individuals daily, reaching 500 individuals in total over the five-month program. It is the only such facility in Mariupol that operates every day of the week.

Program staff will prioritize daily meals for a period of up to two weeks to allow severely malnourished individuals to stabilize. Other beneficiaries, including residents at a city homeless shelter next door to the canteen, will receive regular meals throughout the program. Caritas staff will work to connect the beneficiaries to medical and psychosocial programs which also can support them.

CNEWA serves as the sole, institutional donor to this program. Financial support is urgently needed to allow this emergency assistance to move forward.

Your contribution and prayers will offer hope and save lives.

To donate, please visit: cnewa.org/campaigns/ukraine/

¹ As cited in Courtney Mares, “Pope Francis Tells Ukrainian Catholic leaders to persevere in hope amid Donbas conflict,” Catholic News Agency, 6 July 2019, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/41721/pope-francis-tells-ukrainian-catholic-leaders-to-persevere-in-hope-amid-donbas-conflict>, accessed 10 Dec 2021.

² As cited in Voice of America, byline the Associated Press, “Pope Calls on Russia, Ukraine to Seek Reconciliation,” 18 April 2021, https://www.voanews.com/a/europe_pope-calls-russia-ukraine-seek-reconciliation/6204739.html and Speech at the Apostolic Palace of the Vatican on 5 July 2019, as cited in Courtney Mares, “Pope Francis Tells Ukrainian Catholic leaders to persevere in hope amid Donbas conflict,” Catholic News Agency, 6 July 2019, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/41721/pope-francis-tells-ukrainian-catholic-leaders-to-persevere-in-hope-amid-donbas-conflict>, accessed 10 Dec 2021.