

Supporting beleaguered Ukrainians suffering war's toll



When a building is shaking due to incessant bombing, it causes fear but “we are with the people” a Salesian priest delivering aid to Ukraine tells **Chai Brady**

The world has looked on in horror at the devastation and death left behind by Russian soldiers who retreated from a town north-east of Ukraine's capital of Kyiv over the weekend, while some offered strong words of criticism, there are those quietly continuing to deliver aid across the embattled nation and helping refugees at the borders.

Reports that Russian soldiers have committed numerous war crimes – the town of Bucha which they occupied being one example – across Ukraine have continued to grow as the leaders of other European countries offer condemnation and aid. This is not enough according to Fr Roman Sikon SDB who has been driving truckloads of supplies into Ukraine from Poland.

Speaking from a town close to Lviv in Ukraine, Fr Sikon was optimistic about the future of Ukraine and its people. He says: “We can see the great fighting spirit and unity against the aggressors, against Russian war criminals who are coming here, so I think the Ukrainian nation won't be defeated in this war. I don't know how long it will take, maybe months, maybe years – but I think, even for years, they are ready to fight.”

He says there has been “big disappointment” among the people of Ukraine due to the actions of some European countries. He mentions France and Germany who are continuing to do business on a large scale with Russia due to their dependence on Russian gas.

“We can say they are financing this war for Russia. So this is the big disappointment for people here, and pain... in this war Ukraine is alone. Of course, there is supply coming from Nato, we don't know what kind of supply it will be but it's coming,” he says, adding “there's no safe place in Ukraine”.

Even in Lviv, which has become a hub for refugees, and as it's close to



A building near the National University in Kharkiv, Ukraine, burns after shelling. Photo CNS

Poland many refugees pass through the city before crossing the border. Fr Sikon says that even Lviv, which is considered safer than other more war-torn parts of the country, “was attacked by sophisticated weapons launched from the Black Sea”.

“Sometimes we're going to the places that are supposed to be safe but even there, if we stay there for one night, the city is attacked by rockets. When you can feel the building shaking, the windows shaking, it makes you scared but we are with the people here,” he says.

His Salesian community are based in Krakow where they collect donations and bring them via car and truck to several areas across Ukraine, including the capital Kyiv, Odesa and Korostyshiv.

Money

One of the most important things people need is money, Fr Sikon says, as well as food, fuel and medicine.

Asked if he ever felt fear going out on his journeys around Ukraine, he says that he arrived in Kyiv just one day before Russia invaded. “This attack was of course very big, from seven directions. So you can feel scared. I was in the crowd to run away to Poland, we walked 18km then we waited 18 hours on the border to enter Poland.

“Later they ask me in Krakow can I try to drive the first small truck to bring things to Ukraine and I said yes,

but later you have some doubts but on the day when I was starting, when I was going to Ukraine, we read the Gospel and Jesus said, the one who wants to save his life will lose it... this Gospel gave me strength. I went through the border a few times with our transport, with our relief help,” Fr Sikon says. He has been delivering aid to Ukraine for more than a month and a half now.

“Reports that Russian soldiers have committed numerous war crimes”

Speaking directly to the people of Ireland, he says: “What is important to say to the people of Ireland is that it's not war, like somebody is fighting with somebody, there is an innocent country, the victim is Ukraine, the war criminals are the Russian army.

“It is not only Putin, it is Russia again from the ages, it doesn't matter if it's the Tsar or Lenin, Stalin, all of them, they want to kill our nations, Ukraine, and Poland too, and other nations. The situation for us is similar from history, so maybe that's why Poland especially understands that Ukraine is fighting also for us. In Europe we have to understand they are fighting for us all.”

Fr Sikon accused Russian soldiers and pilots of deliberately tar-

getting civilians, including women and children.

“They don't respect any humanitarian efforts, they bomb people who want to run away from the city, they are shooting cars and buses with people and children in them. Even if they have agreements to keep safe corridors, when the people start to move they don't respect those and still shoot, there are many, many testimonies like that,” he says.

“Mines, land mines and special mines, they send them by plane with small parachutes in different places and those mines are specially for people and they are very sensitive. You don't have to touch this mine, it is enough if you are walking close by they feel the vibration and then they kill people, this is what they [Russian military] do.”

Faith

The faith of the Ukrainian people has gone from strength to strength despite the war, Fr Sikon believes, saying that it is growing “even though it is very hard and painful for people and we are living in the fear of losing this life, on this earth”.

About three quarters of the population of Ukraine is Christian Orthodox while more than 10% identifying as Catholic. The west of Ukraine is where Catholicism would be strongest.

“When Pope Francis consecrated Ukraine and Russia to the Immaculate Heart of Mary a lot of people

gathered in this small parish, almost 100,000 parishioners came for this prayer,” Fr Sikon says. The consecration took place on March 25 and was led by the Pope in St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican.

“The spiritual condition of the Ukrainians is growing and they believe the moral justice is on the side of Ukraine. We know that Ukraine did not attack Russia, they are the ones who are being attacked by Russia. So the situation in this context is comfortable and people are strong.”

Fr Sikon states that the war in Ukraine is very much a “spiritual fight”, which is why they are fighting first and foremost with prayer. “We are praying for peace every day,” he says.

The bishop of Odesa, according to Fr Sikon, has called the exorcists in the diocese to use the exorcism ritual on Russian President Vladimir Putin to “chase out the demons who are ruling the country through him”.

“St Michael is the patron of Ukraine, we are praying to him to win this war, because the peace here will come only through the victory of Ukraine,” he adds. Donations to the Salesians can be made through salesiansireland.ie

Suffering

It's not just the Salesians who are assisting the people of Ukraine, many congregations are working hard to alleviate suffering and provide spiritual and material support.

John Moffett, the CEO of Misaean Cara, an organisation which supports missionary congregations and volunteer organisations and has 88 members working in 51 countries around the globe, says missionaries are uniquely placed to respond to humanitarian crises.

“His Salesian community are based in Krakow where they collect donations and bring them via car and truck to several areas across Ukraine”



Fr Roman Sikon (right) stands in front of supplies which will be distributed to Ukrainian refugees.

Currently in Ukraine there are a number of members of Misesan Cara who have a congregational presence. This includes the Jesuits, the Redemptorists, the Salesians of Don Bosco, the Salesian Sisters, the Salvatorians, the Daughters of Charity and the Loreto Sisters also have a connection.

Mr Moffett says the orders that they know are actively responding to the crisis are the Jesuits, the Redemptorists, the Salesian Sisters, the Salesian of Don Bosco and the Salvatorians.

“One of the most important things people need is money, Fr Sikon says, as well as food, fuel and medicine”

“I can’t stress enough just how well placed these missionary organisations are to respond first and uniquely to the needs of people in Ukraine as they’re suffering from the loss of services, the lack of transport, the shelter they need during bombing,” he says.

Network

Another advantage missionaries have is access to “a fantastic network through the churches, they’re working with local communities to help find longer term accommodation for people as well,” says Mr Moffett, “The missionaries are using all the facilities that they have available to the disposal of people. They are providing people with help as they move out of Ukraine, as people are moving across countries and particularly in Poland, they are providing support to people who are queuing up at the border, giving out blankets, food, water.

“The Salesian sisters are providing medical aid to people who have been injured through bombings in Lviv and Odesa. The Salesians are working on both sides of the border providing shelter in their facilities, churches and homes. They’re there at reception centres in Poland to help them get access to accommodation, to provide them with a cup of tea, blankets and clothes for all the people that are leaving everything behind as they move out.”

While it is clear that many Ukrainian refugees long to return home, even

if the war were to end tomorrow there is still extensive damage done to vital infrastructure which will take many years to rebuild.

Mr Moffett says missionaries, when the time comes, will have a role in the rebuilding efforts. “We all hope that a ceasefire will come in the near future but if you look at the extensive damage that’s been done it will be a long, long time before people are able to return to Ukraine that have left the country so it’s not a short term fix and I guess the challenge of this crisis is that once the immediate emergency is over the funding can dry up very quickly so what’s going to be needed is a long term commitment and support which missionary organisations are absolutely devoted to and they’ll be there both during this initial crisis but through the longer period of recovery and the return back to Ukraine when people are able to do so.”

He adds: “We’re trying to promote the work that they’re doing in Ukraine and to help them raise funds so we’re both accepting donations to Misesan Cara that we pass on to our members but also on our website we’re advertising their own fundraising efforts and promoting the work that they’re doing and directing people to their websites so they can directly contribute towards them.”

Education

There is a plethora of challenges refugees face including barriers to education, trauma, the loss of their livelihoods and much more.

Emilia Sorrentino, the Education in Emergencies Specialist for the charity Plan International, told The Irish Catholic they have sent teams out to Moldova, Romania and Poland to assist in the refugee crisis.

She says they are supporting national organisations in the countries in a variety of ways, including to provide child protection services.

In Moldova in particular they have “set up mobile units who are composed of child protection social workers, there are lawyers, psychologists, who are providing psychological first aid because many of the refugees, you can imagine, are distressed because of the situation. They have witnessed destruction they have left family members behind so it’s evident that they really are in need of psychosocial support”, she explains.

They are providing support particularly to children who are unaccompanied and separated and may not be crossing the border with their parents.

Ms Sorrentino says: “We have been at the borders, and we have wit-



Plan International donated 500 backpacks to the City Hall of Chisinau in response to a request to support child refugees from Ukraine who have been enrolled at schools in Moldova. Photo: Plan International Tat



Fr Sikon pictures men with supplies for Ukrainian refugees.

nessed many women crossing with a lot of children who are not necessarily their sons and daughters therefore these children are, in particular, at risk of sexual and gender-based violence – the likes of trafficking – but the same risk is there for the women.

“We’re trying to promote the work that they’re doing in Ukraine and to help them raise funds so we’re both accepting donations”

“Most of the refugees, the large majority, are women and children and elderly. Most of the young men are left behind because they are engaging in the fight, supporting the military operation in Ukraine and they are not allowed to cross. “So we have witnessed children who are completely distressed and shocked because they had to leave their fathers behind and they do not know when they will see their fathers again or their brothers,” she says.

According to Plan International many of the refugees who are crossing in recent times may not have a plan compared to refugees who fled earlier in the war. Ms Sorrento says that the first wave refugees that

were crossing had financial means, they were crossing the border in cars, and many had relatives in other European countries or a support network somewhere “but now the situation has changed”.

“More and more of the refugees who are crossing are vulnerable, they don’t have much financial means and they don’t have a plan, so they don’t know what they are going to do next,” she says.

Regarding their child protection efforts, they have seen many refugees crossing without identification documents. While adults may have IDs there are children who do not have any documents.

Ms Sorrento explained: “There are also newborn children who were born a few days before the war has started, so they don’t have a birth certificate, this is another big challenge and without any documents it is really difficult for them to continue their journey even if they want to continue and go to other European countries.”

Education

Providing education for refugee children who speak a different language is something Ireland is already trying to navigate. Ms Sorrento says they are trying to assist the education systems in the three countries in which they are operating to help integrate refugee children who are enrolling in their schools.

“There is a need for children who want enrol to have bridging classes to learn the language, so Polish in the case of Poland and Romanian in the case of Romania, unless they are able to enrol in a Russian speaking school for instance, in Moldova there are some Russian speaking schools: Some children are bilingual so they speak Ukrainian and Russian,” Ms Sorrento says.

The level of support and engagement of local communities in Moldova, Romania and Poland is “huge”, Ms Sorrento adds, “so they are really making a huge effort, they have been at the forefront of the response and I think this has to be acknowledged.

“What international humanitarian organisations and the international community can do is really to support them, to work in collaboration with them, because they were definitely those who were there when the first refugees started crossing the borders”