

Children in Ukraine

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Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February, 2022, nearly **half a million children** in Ukraine were in need of humanitarian assistance due to the Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict that started in 2014, especially in the east of the country, where children have endured the daily threat of shelling and landmines, in addition to a lack of basic amenities and proper education. Today, after more than 2 months of war, almost two-thirds of the 7.5 million children living in Ukraine have been forced to leave their homes, increasing the number of children in need of humanitarian assistance to more than **3 million** and putting **1.5 million** children at risk of not having enough food and water.

In 2005, the UN Security Council recognised and condemned six categories of grave human rights violations against children in times of armed conflict: killing and maiming of children, abduction, recruitment or use in armed forces, sexual violence, attacks against schools or hospitals, and denial of humanitarian access. These violations have direct effects on children's physical, mental, developmental, and behavioural health. Additionally, the social and psychological impact of such violations linger long after the war has ended and often persist into adulthood. Post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, behavioural and psychosomatic complaints, and substance abuse are common among children who have experienced war and, in some cases, interfere with their development into adulthood.

Sima Bahous, Executive Director of UN-Women, has warned the UN Security Council about a potential protection crisis in Ukraine as reports of grave violations against children have emerged. As of April 10, UNICEF has confirmed that more than **350 children** have been killed or injured in crossfire or by the use of explosive weapons since the war started, but the numbers are undoubtedly much higher. Field reports have raised awareness of the illegal deportation of children to Russia, and Russian soldiers taking children hostage to use them as human shields. Schools and hospitals are also being targeted by Russian forces.

UNICEF has been reaching out to children to provide psychosocial and mental health support, and protection services. For example, Blue Dot centres have been established on Ukrainian borders to identify and

protect unaccompanied or separated children and to offer a safe space for children and families. The UN Refugee Agency has been supporting more than 70 reception centres for internally displaced people and running cash assistance programmes for vulnerable people to cover the cost of basic needs. Additionally, non-profit organisations that advocate for children's welfare are also providing aid to the best of their capacity.

Regrettably, these considerable efforts are insufficient in the absence of a single comprehensive legal and civil instrument with its own accountability mechanism that exclusively ensures the protection of children in armed conflicts. The need for such an instrument, along with the need of improving existing international laws and encouraging countries to ratify existing treaties and protocols was suggested in the 2018 **Protecting Children in Armed Conflict report**, but unfortunately none of this has been fully achieved.

There are political, collective, and individual actions that can help improve the situation of children living in Ukraine. Political actions must first include providing safe areas for children to live as soon as possible. To ensure that violations are not repeated, governments bear the primary responsibility and should adopt clear legislation that allows for swift investigation and prosecution of crimes. Other challenging actions include enabling families to settle quickly, developing physical and psychological rehabilitation programmes, and providing education in times of war; children need to socialise and acquire basic skills to participate in the reconstruction and development of their country. Collectively, experts from different fields can come together to develop guides, incorporating Ukrainian traditions and culture, to advise parents, caregivers, health-care workers, or volunteers on how to assist children exposed to war. At the individual level, people can help by drawing attention to the ongoing violations through social media, peaceful demonstrations, writing about them, speaking out and sharing the news, and by donating generously to humanitarian charities.

An unprecedented and growing number of children around the world are suffering from the devastating immediate and long-term consequences of armed conflicts. The children in Ukraine today are tomorrow's future of Ukraine. These children need protection, care, safety, and a healthy environment to thrive.