

As delivered

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Remarks at Member States Briefing on Ukraine

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Excellencies, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

I am grateful for this opportunity to brief you on the ongoing humanitarian crisis in eastern Ukraine. I have just returned from there and had the chance to cross the conflict lines, and witness first-hand how, after four years of violence, it is ordinary men, women and children who still bear the brunt of the suffering.

Today, around four million Ukrainians need humanitarian assistance, particularly in the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. At least 2,500 civilians have been killed since hostilities began, and nearly 9,000 people have been injured. Almost every night, civilians are subject to shelling and sporadic fighting between parties to the conflict along a 459-kilometre conflict line in Europe's back yard.

I was struck by the resilience and stoicism of the conflict-affected people I met in Ukraine, but I was also disturbed to see that some were beginning to lose hope. They felt the world was no longer interested in their plight. As one mother in Sviatohirsk told me: "Our children have already seen more violence and hardship than I have in 37 years. We do not know what the future holds for them."

The Ukraine Government has registered over 1.6 million internally displaced people across the country. The most vulnerable among them are the elderly, with pensioners making up over half of the total number of people in need. As host communities' hospitality wanes and as assets run dry, many of these internally displaced people are surviving on next to nothing, their coping mechanisms eroded.

Valentina, aged 65, lives in a small damp room in Sviatohirsk, home to many IDPs. Cut off from her family members, who are living in an insecure area, Valentina fears falling sick in the dead cold of winter, which is unforgiving in Ukraine. She cannot afford to replace her broken walking stick, so it is hard for her to get around.

Sergiy, 54, lives nearby in a centre for displaced families. He put it simply. "We need fuel for the winter, now. We do not know if we will survive without coal."

Valentina, Sergiy and many others I met, spoke of facing impossible choices: whether to spend their meagre resources on buying food, coal or medicine. This is not the life of dignity that they deserve.

Legal impediments make it difficult for IDPs to access the basic services and entitlements they need and as such, they still require humanitarian assistance, in the form of healthcare, food, shelter and counselling services. The needs of host communities must also be addressed, as resentment, discrimination and stigma of IDPs mounts. Repairs are urgently needed to damaged, critical infrastructure near the 'contact line' to ensure that inter-dependent water and heating systems work. If not, thousands of civilians will have to seek new dwellings.

Particularly hard-hit are the 3 million people in Ukraine who live in non-Government controlled areas across the contact line. Facing severe restrictions on their freedom of movement, many of them have very limited or no access to basic health, education and other services. Up to one million crossings are made a month as the sick seek medical care, and the elderly pick up their pensions. Some 600,000 pensioners across the contact line have not been able to access their pensions at all, due to bureaucratic hurdles.

Eastern Ukraine also faces severe protection concerns. It is rapidly becoming one of the most mined areas in the world, which, if not addressed, will stall reconstruction and development for many years to come. Mine clearance and risk education is needed in all conflict-affected areas, particularly along the contact line, including the checkpoints at the de-facto border.

While active fighting declined in September, we are seeing further politicization of humanitarian assistance by all parties as a tool in the conflict. Despite some improvements, particularly in Government-controlled areas, parties to the conflict have not complied with key elements of the Minsk agreements on ensuring people's access to humanitarian assistance.

Of greatest concern is the fact that access to people of concern is still restricted in Donetsk and Luhansk. This does not stop NGOs and UN agencies from carrying out emergency assistance and protection, but it does impede our ability to scale up.

We urge the de facto authorities to allow all UN and INGO programmes to resume in full, for the benefit of the people for whom they are responsible, consistent with international law. I also appeal to the Government of Ukraine to do all it can to ensure freedom of movement of civilians, and to end the commercial ban across the contact line. And I urge the Government to adopt a comprehensive approach to solve the plight of Internally Displaced Persons, including through its IDP Strategy.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The United Nations and humanitarian organizations continue to assist where they can and to advocate for access where they cannot. Between January to June 2017, about 2 million people were provided with some form of aid, be it access to safe water, food assistance, essential items, education materials and hygiene kits.

But access constraints and resource shortages stop us from providing so much more. This year's Humanitarian Response Plan – near to the end of the year – is just 26 per cent funded. The Humanitarian Country Team is currently assessing needs and planning the 2018 response, but it is impossible to do so effectively without some assurance from donors that support will be forthcoming.

I am very grateful to the Humanitarian Coordinator, Neal Walker, who has led humanitarian operations in Ukraine for three years and clearly recognizes the importance of aligning humanitarian and development action in order to achieve the durable solutions that IDPs like Valentina and Sergiy sorely need.

I also thank the Government of Ukraine for its commitment to improve the ability of humanitarians to operate in both eastern Ukraine and the areas it controls, and I urge it to dismantle remaining bureaucratic impediments to freedom of movement.

Before I hand over to Ambassador Yelchenko, let me close by reminding all here today: Ukrainians are entering the fourth winter with no definitive ceasefire on the horizon. As members of the international community, we each have a part to play in supporting conflict resolution and lasting peace. This is the only lasting humanitarian solution for millions of people in Ukraine.

Thank you.