



Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

**UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND  
EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR, STEPHEN O'BRIEN**

**Statement to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Ukraine**

New York, 02 February 2017

*As delivered.*

Mr. President,

Thank you for the opportunity to brief the Council on the humanitarian situation in Ukraine.

Over three years into the conflict in eastern Ukraine, in what has become yet another protracted humanitarian crisis, we are now faced with a significant deterioration in the situation following the sudden and recent escalation in violence. This escalation on both sides of the 'contact line' in Donetsk Oblast near Avdiivka and Donetsk city has claimed the lives of four civilians, all women, since 18 January, according to OHCHR, and according to the UN team on the ground, is resulting in widespread fear, panic and a real struggle to survive by civilians. We call on all parties to immediately cease all hostilities to prevent further loss of life and further unacceptable human suffering.

The current escalation in violence is causing severe damage to critical infrastructure – water, electricity and heating. Combined with low winter temperatures, the result is a deteriorating humanitarian situation. Today temperatures are minus 10 degrees Celsius, but minus 20 is not unheard of at this time of the year. Adequate shelter, heating and access to water are therefore essential to people's survival. Shelling has damaged electricity and water systems, with a knock-on effect on the heating supply, and once damaged it can take days or weeks for systems to restart. For civilians living on both sides of the frontline, this means they are not only traumatized, living a precarious and dangerous existence, but damage to critical services is making survival an issue. We are also concerned about the reported presence of heavy weapons in urban areas, which further heighten the risk to civilians' lives.

For example, critical water and electricity systems in Avdiivka, a frontline town in Government-controlled areas, were damaged by the recent violence on 29 and 30 January. The UN and other humanitarian partners joined a Government-led assessment team to the town on 1 February, and are working to ensure critical needs are met in support of the Government. This is not without risk. For example, two technical teams sent to repair infrastructure were promised a ceasefire for



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a few hours on 1 February in order to carry out their work, but were subjected to small arms fire in non-government controlled areas and as a result were forced to abandon their work. A similar incident took place earlier today. The arrival of powerful generators on 31 January in Avdiivka provided some temporary respite to 17,000 people, including 2,500 children, but this is not sufficient. Unless repairs are made, power that keeps the heating system functioning in Avdiivka cannot be fully restored. The result could be displacement on a large scale.

Avdiivka is not alone. Around one million people in non-government controlled areas in Donetsk City were without water or heating for 24 hours following the shelling. A repair team has managed to fix some power lines, thereby managing to preserve the city's heating systems, and avoid a major catastrophe. Elsewhere, the 500,000 inhabitants of Mariupol are now reliant on a back-up reservoir after the water main on which the city depends developed a massive leak. It will take several days – once hostilities are over – to ensure the area is demined and heavy machinery can access the area to carry out repairs. Unfortunately, shelling could be heard again last night in Donetsk, and in other areas along the contact line.

Mr. President,

I welcome yesterday's statement of the Trilateral Contact Group in Minsk which called for not only 'strict adherence to a full and comprehensive cessation of fire', but also 'facilitation of humanitarian efforts aimed at the restoration of water, electricity and heating supplies, including through repair of infrastructure'. I also acknowledge the efforts of the Government of Ukraine and the *de facto* authorities to provide critical heating and water for those most at risk, but highlight that this is not enough. On 31 January, the Government of Ukraine appealed to international organizations to prepare to support civilian evacuees from Avdiivka should it be necessary. The United Nations and international NGOs stand ready to support.

Mr. President,

If hostilities continue, we may also be faced with a serious environmental crisis. Damage to the Phenol plant near Novgorodske village means that waste chemicals, including deadly sulfuric acid and formaldehyde, are now at critical levels. Leakage into the surrounding land and the Seversky Donets River would have disastrous humanitarian consequences in a highly industrialized part of Europe. Similarly, there is a real risk at present that damage to water facilities could have further deadly consequences for the population living in the surrounding areas, with the potential leak of chlorine gas which is routinely stored at such facilities



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Mr. President,

This latest escalation in violence is exacerbating the ongoing needs of an estimated 3.8 million civilians who continue to bear the brunt of this protracted conflict and who require various degrees of humanitarian assistance. There are 700,000 more people in need this year compared to those identified in the 2016 Humanitarian Response Plan. More than 60 per cent of those in need – some 2.3 million people – reside in non-government controlled areas. Further, over 70 per cent of people in need are the elderly, women and children. These demographics are particularly vulnerable and must be accessed immediately with life-saving assistance and protection interventions.

When I visited Luhansk and Donetsk just over a year ago, I met an octogenarian woman living in one room in the bombed-out ruins of her house. Her son had been killed in the cracked remains of what was once her front door when he happened to be visiting to check on her safety, and a bomb just came down on him – an innocent non-combatant nipping back in the lunch-hour from his market stall. Tending to her rambling rose bush growing through the charred remains of her house, she told me of her unquenchable grief, of the cold she endured, and that she would only light a camp fire during the night as she was afraid any smoke during the day would allow others to target her location. It was truly heart-breaking. This is the reality for so many civilians caught in this conflict, trapped by the fighting with minimal shelter, critical services cut-off and in desperate need of assistance and building repair materials, to prevent death or injury by either the violence or the elements.

While some humanitarian response efforts continue, since July 2015 the *de facto* authorities in Donetsk and Luhansk have imposed undue bureaucratic restrictions severely affecting humanitarian access. This is in contradiction to their commitments under Article 7 of the Minsk Full Package of Measures, as well as their responsibilities under international humanitarian law. Few partners are officially allowed to operate in these areas and, on 25 November, the international NGO *People in Need* – the last INGO to have access – was summarily ejected from Donetsk non-government controlled areas, depriving 140,000 people of immediate life-saving assistance. The United Nations repeats its appeal to all parties to guarantee the security and unimpeded access for the United Nations and humanitarian partners to all people in need, wherever they may be.

Finally, government-imposed bureaucratic impediments, particularly in relation to the ban on commercial trade and importation of food and medicines across the ‘contact line’, remain a serious constraint to alleviating the humanitarian crisis. In addition, suspension of social payments by the Government has severely affected hundreds of thousands of displaced people.

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Mr. President,

I am alarmed at the turn this conflict has taken, and the increasing toll this has on the civilian population. As the humanitarian situation in Ukraine deteriorates, increasing numbers of people are at risk and in need, their resilience eroded and their hope fading. The inability to reach a political solution to this crisis is resulting in further civilian casualties, damage to critical infrastructure and more human suffering. This suffering will continue until this conflict comes to an end once and for all.

Thank you.