



## Protecting the Children of Ukraine

Today, June 1st, marks the International Day for the Protection of Children—a day dedicated to advocating for the well-being and safety of children worldwide. The children of Ukraine who have been living through unimaginable hardships since Russia’s full-scale invasion which began in February 2022 need a special focus today. Around 7.5 million Ukrainian children are affected by Russian aggression.

Since the brutal and unprovoked invasion by Russia, Ukrainian children have faced immense adversity. Many have lost their parents and live in constant fear, clinging to hope for the safe return of their loved ones from the front lines. The joy of these reunions is fleeting, overshadowed by the relentless air raids and the endless hours spent in bomb shelters due to indiscriminate attacks.

According to official UN data, since the start of the invasion, almost 600 children have been killed and over 1,400 injured due to Russian attacks. Additionally, more than 2,000 children are currently missing, and an estimated 20,000 have been kidnapped, deported, or forcibly displaced by the Russian forces. Only a fraction of these children—388—have been returned. Furthermore, at least 15 children have been reported sexually abused by Russian soldiers. The equivalent of a child dying every day since the war escalated, mostly from bombardment.

However, the actual toll is likely much higher!

The war doesn’t always leave visible scars only. The toll of this war on children is staggering. Psychologists in Ukraine report that almost every child is grappling with issues caused by the invasion. One of the most heart-wrenching effects of war on children is the loss of close relatives, parents, and friends. Many children are left orphaned or forced to live in devastated and disorganised conditions. This not only creates material hardships, but also leads to emotional trauma, a sense of loss and alienation. Young people across the country are experiencing profound loss, fear, and anxiety. Many suffer from sleep disturbances, panic attacks, and flashbacks, with a notable rise in child depression. This generation is growing up under constant threat, facing daily missile attacks that devastate civilian infrastructure crucial to their well-being. In the first three months of 2024 alone, over a thousand homes, 37 medical facilities, and over 140 educational institutions have been damaged or destroyed.

In addition, the Prosecutor General's Office of Ukraine registered close to 900 criminal proceedings related to crimes against sexual freedom and sexual inviolability of children since the Russian invasion, perpetrated by the Russian occupiers.

The education system in Ukraine has been severely disrupted. The ongoing destruction forces many schools to conduct classes online or in underground shelters. This academic year, over one million children—one-quarter of all Ukrainian school-aged children—have been unable to attend in-person classes. This disruption is particularly harmful to children with disabilities or special educational needs. Frequent air raid alarms and power outages exacerbate the situation, leading to significant learning losses and long-term developmental impacts.

Children in front-line communities have spent up to 5,000 hours in bomb shelters over the past two years. This exposure to constant danger and stress has severe psychological and emotional consequences. Forced displacement separates families, increasing the risks of exploitation, and abuse. Displaced families and those living near the front lines struggle to access essential healthcare, further endangering children's health, and development.



Furthermore, one of the most devastating effects of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been the illegal deportation of children. Currently, estimates of the number of deported children are in the tens of thousands. At the same time, the media confirm that the number of deported Ukrainian children for whom the Russian authorities are openly looking for foster families is close to 3000. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted a resolution recognising the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia as genocide earlier this year. And in March 2023, the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for Russian president Vladimir Putin and Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova in connection with the illegal deportation of Ukrainian children.

Despite these harrowing conditions, the international community cannot remain indifferent. The ongoing hostilities inflict tremendous physical, psychological, and emotional harm on Ukrainian children, disrupting their lives and threatening their futures. Children are the future of the Ukrainian society, and it is our duty to ensure their safety, protection, and opportunities for healthy development. It is crucial that we recognise and address the profound impact of this war on the youngest and most vulnerable.

### **A Call to Action**

Millions of Ukrainian children are enduring immense hardships due to Russia's invasion. Many have lost their parents, and only a few can attend school regularly. Hundreds of children have been killed by Russia, thousands more injured and abused, tens of thousands were kidnapped and forcefully relocated to Russia and into re-education camps to grow hatred for Ukraine in their hearts, millions became displaced, and millions more are under a constant threat of Russian bombs and the constant stress of the air raid sirens!

New Zealand must play its part in protecting these children. We cannot passively observe these horrific crimes. On this International Day for the Protection of Children, let us commit to advocating for and assisting the children of Ukraine, ensuring that they have a future free from fear and full of hope.

As highlighted by the President Zelenskyy and various international appeals, the provision of air defence systems is crucial for protecting the lives of Ukrainian civilians, especially children. Providing Ukraine with advanced air defence systems will be instrumental in stopping the Russian military aggression, reducing civilian casualties, and safeguarding critical infrastructure, including schools and hospitals. New Zealand can play a pivotal role in supporting Ukraine's call for air defence systems, which is essential for maintaining long-term peace, protecting vulnerable populations, and upholding international law. A timely action will help ensure the safety and security of Ukrainian children and contribute to the global effort to end the war based on justice and respect for international law.

Together, we can make a difference. Let us stand with the children of Ukraine and work towards a world where every child is safe, healthy, and educated.

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