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The International Committee of the Red Cross has been working in Ukraine for eight years. Prior to the recent escalation, we had around 600 staff in-country. The Ukrainian Red Cross Society (URCS), as the national Red Cross society, is present across the country with around 3000 volunteers.

Impact on civilians

The humanitarian situation in Ukraine is increasingly dire and desperate. We are urgently scaling up our response by the hour to meet people's vast needs. According to the [United Nations](#), the conflict has now uprooted some 10 million people from their homes – 3.5 million of whom have left the country. The level of humanitarian need is skyrocketing. It's difficult to put a figure on the number of casualties – hundreds if not thousands have been killed, while many more have been injured.

The level of need varies across the country. Our colleague in Mariupol described the situation there as 'apocalyptic'. That was more than two weeks ago and the situation has deteriorated since then. People in the city have no food, water, power or heat in freezing conditions. They are subjected to constant shelling and the city is being slowly suffocated. Without being able to bring aid into the city, we are deeply concerned by the level of human suffering in the city.

In other parts of the country we have seen huge numbers of people on the move and significant levels of destruction. Those who stay are often hunkered down in basements and face great difficulty in accessing the basics that are needed to sustain human life. It is a very dangerous time to be a civilian in Ukraine, it is also a very dangerous time for aid organisations.

We know full well from our experiences in other parts of the world that when heavy weaponry is used in densely populated urban areas, the results will be catastrophic for civilians. The intensity and spread of the conflict risk a scale of death and destruction that are frightening to contemplate, given the immense military capacities involved.

What the law says

Whereas the vast majority of wars currently taking place in the world are non-international armed conflicts, sometimes referred to as civil wars, what we are seeing happen in Ukraine is legally classified as an international armed conflict. This means that the [Geneva Conventions](#) and their [First Additional Protocol](#) are fully applicable, as are [customary international humanitarian laws](#) and a number of [weapons treaties](#).

Under the laws of war, there are three cardinal principles that regulate the way in which a party to an armed conflict may carry out military operations, i.e. may conduct hostilities. These are the principles of distinction, proportionality and precautions, all codified in [Additional Protocol I](#) and all [customary international law](#). They aim to protect civilians against the effect



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of hostilities. Attacks carried out with [new technologies](#) and [cyber means](#) must also respect international humanitarian law.

As an international armed conflict involving immense military capacities, and with humanitarian consequences of a scale not seen in such a short period of time for decades, this conflict may appear of a different order of magnitude. However, unprecedented though it may seem, from the perspective of IHL this conflict does not give rise to a new rule book: IHL was made to limit the consequences of exactly such conflicts.

While I do not have time to run through in detail what IHL stipulates, I will say that from the outset the ICRC has made clear to all parties – both privately and publicly – that they must respect their legal obligations to protect civilians from harm. The rules of war are not optional.

Red Cross action in Ukraine

The ICRC and Ukrainian Red Cross are doing their utmost to support people. We know full well that the aid we have managed to deliver is a drop in the ocean compared to the huge level of need.

When the conflict first started, ICRC responded immediately with what we had, wherever we were. We are now scaling up massively. Flexibility and adaptability are of the essence. We have now **mobile teams in Kyiv, Poltava, Dnipro, Odessa and still working in Donetsk and Luhansk** identifying major needs, gaps and places where supplies need to be sent out, but also purchasing locally to sustain the most urgent needs, often in collaboration with the URCS.

- **Some examples of our current activities:**

- We are facilitating safe passage for civilians (twice in Sumy for example)
- We are bringing more supplies in; 200 tons of medical and relief supplies arrived this week—supplies to be distributed ASAP to Dnipro, Kharkiv, Kyiv, Odessa, Poltava, and other locations
- We conduct Blast Trauma Care refreshment training for SESU Poltava Regional Branch Pyrotechnic Unit
- We distributed food and hygiene items (1150 food parcels, 1150 HK), plastic sheeting and tarpaulin in Makeevka and Novoazovsk (Donetsk); We have been in Donbass since 2014. We are addressing needs where we can, for example in Donetsk, we donated medical equipment, tarps, about 4000 L of water and some mattresses, blankets and other items.

Of course the notable gap in our work is Mariupol where we have been unable to deliver aid to date. We urgently need an agreement between the parties to bring aid in and to ensure the safe passage out for those wishing to leave. We continue to speak directly with the parties about how urgently civilians in Mariupol need relief and safe passage from the city and stand ready to help facilitate.



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The sheer scale of Mariupol—hundreds of thousands of people—will mean that a ceasefire has to hold not just for a few hours, but potentially for days for this to happen safely.

The ICRC has a team in Dnipro (320 km from Mariupol). We are sending aid to both Dnipro and Zaporizhia (220 km from Mariupol). We are sending medical supplies to care for trauma injuries to different hospitals in Dnipro and Zaporizhia as well as relief supplies for displaced families.

We are engaging all parties to the conflict on a bilateral and confidential dialogue to ensure they abide by their international humanitarian law (IHL) obligations, including the respect of civilian objects, such as essential infrastructure, and, more broadly, all other IHL rules on the conduct of hostilities. Our president visited Kyiv last week and will be in Moscow later this week to further this dialogue.

Together with the International Federation of the Red Cross Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), we are in close contact with our Red Cross and Red Crescent movement partners in Hungary, Romania, Moldova, Slovakia, Poland, Russia and Belarus, as well as the Ukrainian Red Cross, whose support will be essential in the coming days and weeks. Our Red Cross partners in neighboring countries are responding to the unfolding crisis and are mobilizing to help people arriving. And the Irish Red Cross is working hard to welcome refugees arriving in Ireland.

Thanks

Finally, I would like to thank the Irish government and people for the funding provided to our operations. Irish Aid has pledged €5M to ICRC for Ukraine (NB this is 25% of a €20M commitment) plus €1M to our partners at the IFRC.

We would encourage you to continue to promote respect of international humanitarian law – the people caught up in this conflict must be supported and protected.

When it comes to sanctions, we would also encourage you to support our request to the EU for a humanitarian carveout, i.e. exemptions for neutral, impartial humanitarian actors such as the Red Cross.