



The Jewish Federations®
OF NORTH AMERICA
Israel Office

CRISIS IN UKRAINE

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Following weeks of rising tension, and despite international attempts to negotiate a peaceful solution, in the early hours of Thursday morning Russia launched what appears to be a full-blown invasion of Ukraine, home to an estimated 200,000 Jews¹. While Ukrainian forces are attempting to defend their country, Russian troops have entered the Ukrainian capital Kyiv, which was hit overnight by multiple Russian missile strikes.

(For background on the crisis, as well as updated information on the Jewish community in Ukraine, see [here](#)).

RUSSIA INVADES

Russian President Vladimir Putin announced early on Thursday morning that a military operation in Ukraine had commenced, while the Ukrainian Government said that “Russia’s invasion has begun.” At the same time, reports indicated that Russian troops had entered Ukraine from multiple points including via the sea near Odessa, from Russian-occupied Crimea, and across the Ukrainian border with Belorussia. Explosions have been reported in multiple cities including Ukraine’s capital, Kyiv, Kharkiv, as well as Odessa and Lviv² in the west, where many foreign embassies had relocated earlier in the week including those of the United States, Israel and the United Kingdom. The U.S. Embassy in Ukraine has issued a warning for Americans in the country to “shelter in place.” In recent weeks, the Israeli Government has urged all of its citizens in Ukraine to leave immediately.

Responding to the attacks, Ukraine’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs said, “This is an act of war, an attack on sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, a gross violation of the UN Statute and the fundamental norms and principles of international law.” And Ukraine’s foreign minister tweeted, “Ukraine will defend itself. Ukraine will win.”

FIGHTING

The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense said that it had succeeded in inflicting losses on Moscow’s troops and said there had been “tens of people killed” among “the defenders of Ukraine,” including civilians. The Ukrainian Armed Forces has said that six Russian aircraft and a helicopter had been shot down.

¹ According to research by Professor Sergio della Pergola: 43,000 people constitute the core Ukrainian Jewish population (having two Jewish parents who self-identify as Jews). The extended Jewish population, which includes the core population as well as people with one Jewish parent or one grandparent and who have an affinity for Judaism, numbers about 140,000 people. Adding the members of a nuclear family who are not Jewish but are eligible to make Aliyah under Israel’s Law of Return, there is a total of at least 200,000 people.

² These cities are sometimes called Kiev, Kharkov and Lvov, respectively

In contrast, Russia's Ministry of Defense said it had neutralized Ukrainian air defenses, and that Ukraine's border service "did not provide any resistance" to Russian units invading Ukrainian territory. Reports from Ukraine, and especially from the capital, indicate that numerous sites have been hit, and residents are sheltering in subway stations and other protected areas.

According to latest reports, Russian troops have now entered the center of Ukraine's government in Kyiv and multiple explosions have been heard in the city. Witnesses on the ground say that Russian tanks can already be seen in northern sectors of the city, despite the attempts of Ukrainian airborne assault troops who blew up a bridge over the Teteriv River, about 30 miles north of the capital, in an effort to prevent a column of Russian forces from advancing toward the city.

Ukraine's Jewish President Volodymyr Zelensky has introduced martial law across the country, urging citizens to remain calm. Earlier, he said that he had tried to call Putin on Wednesday but was unsuccessful. He called for "everyone who is able" to join the Ukrainian military to do so and stated that Russia was on a "path of evil."

Reports state that there are long lines of traffic out of Kyiv, with citizens attempting to flee the fighting.

REACTIONS

In response to the invasion, United States President Joe Biden stated, "Putin is the aggressor. Putin chose this war. And now he and his country will bear the consequences." Biden also announced a series of sanctions and measures that will "impose severe cost on the Russian economy, both immediately and over time."

Israel's Foreign Minister Yair Lapid said, "The Russian attack on Ukraine is a serious violation of the international order. Israel condemns the attack and is ready and prepared to provide humanitarian assistance to the citizens of Ukraine." This is the first direct criticism of Russia by the Jewish state since the crisis began.

Lapid added, "Israel has deep, long-lasting, and good relations with Russia and with Ukraine. There are tens of thousands of Israelis in both countries, and there are hundreds of thousands of Jews in both countries. Maintaining their security and safety is at the top of our considerations. In addition, we must maintain the security and safety of Foreign Ministry personnel, Nativ personnel and Jewish Agency personnel located in Ukraine. At this time, they are risking their lives to continue to provide assistance and help to every Israeli and every Jew."

The European Union's High Representative Josep Borrell said that "These are among the darkest hours for Europe since the end of World War II."

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson told President Zelensky in a phone call on Thursday that he was "appalled by the unfolding events in Ukraine," that he hoped "Ukraine could resist," and that the United Kingdom had Ukrainians in their thoughts "during this dark time."

NATO member states Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have triggered what is known as "NATO Article Four" which will require the military alliance to launch consultations over their security concerns. Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas said Russia's invasion of Ukraine represented a "threat to the whole of Europe."

While the United States and most European countries have condemned Russia's moves in the strongest possible terms, it is not anticipated that they will respond militarily. Instead, western nations plan to impose "crippling sanctions" on Russia that they believe will even hinder Moscow's ability to fund the war.

In a statement, the Jewish Federations of North America said that, "Jewish Federations condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine and are deeply concerned for the wellbeing of the country's entire population, including the Jewish community.

"We are working to get help to those in need as quickly as possible through our partner organizations, The Jewish Agency for Israel, JDC, and World ORT, which have mobilized their extensive operations on the ground.

“Together we have been preparing for this worst case scenario for weeks.

“Plans now in motion rely on the strong presence built up through years of Federation support that is today serving as a critical lifeline to help protect and safeguard Ukraine's Jewish community, the many important Jewish organizations working in Ukraine, as well as Jews in neighboring countries.

“We pray for safety for all, and for a speedy end to the hostilities.”

JEWISH COMMUNITIES IN UKRAINE UNDER FIRE

The estimated 200,000 Jewish citizens of Ukraine, like their fellow citizens, face extremely difficult times. The majority of the community live in the capital, which is currently under assault by columns of Russian forces. Kyiv Jewish community members have said that thousands of Jewish families have left the city and are living in temporary campsites in different areas in the west of Ukraine. According to the city's Rabbi Yaakov Bleich, “those who managed to get out of town... are fine, but not everyone got out. We're trying to get buses that can help about 200 Jewish community members from Kyiv make it to our campsite.”

Local Jews in Kharkiv reported that they were frightened with heavy rocket fire from the Russian side hitting residential neighborhoods. The Odessa Jewish community has reported that shells hit a nearby Jewish cemetery. Local Jews fled to bomb shelters or stayed in the basements of their apartments. In Dnipro, the Jewish community responded to the Russian invasion with a morning prayer service that was attended by more than 100 people.

The Ukrainian Jewish Federation said in a call to local Jewish residents that “those who can leave Ukraine safely should do so through land crossings.” However the Federation also stressed that, “Most of the rabbis and Chabad emissaries in the country, who have Israeli or American citizenship, remained in Ukraine in order to be with their congregations in these difficult moments, out of heavy responsibility and leadership. In the coming hours, the rabbis of the Federation will hold an emergency meeting during which they will discuss whether to send women and children from the Jewish communities in the east to a place of safety in the west of the country.”

The Federation also asked for world Jewry to pray for its safety. “We call on the Jews of the world to pray for peace and hope that this war will end without any casualties.”

FEDERATION PARTNERS ON THE GROUND

The Jewish Agency for Israel

Last week, the Jewish Agency evacuated its non-essential shlichim (emissaries) from Ukraine, including those from the Israeli Ministry of Education who operated under Agency auspices.

An additional shaliach was sent from Israel to reinforce urgent work being conducted by the Agency's team on the ground in Ukraine. An additional five shlichim are on standby to travel, if needed, and to the extent that travel to Ukraine will be possible.

Agency activities are now being coordinated from a new office in Lviv, located in the west of the country, further away from fighting. These efforts include directing Olim to exit Ukraine via land border crossings with neighboring countries, where Israeli consular representatives are currently stationed.

The Jewish Agency's local employees continue to work from home, subject to safety guidelines and in accordance with developments on the ground. The Agency maintains dozens of Aliyah counselors and staff

members deployed in 14 cities throughout the country. Salary payments to local employees were advanced to ensure their ability to stock up on food and other necessities. Emergency packages were also provided.

At the same time, the Agency has set up two emergency call centers operating 24/7 in Ukraine and in Israel. In Ukraine, the hotline helps process applications for Aliyah and directs callers to various assistance centers. In Israel, the Global Aliyah Center is assisting Israeli families of Ukrainian Jews. The hotlines operate in Hebrew, Ukrainian and Russian, and additional staff are on stand-by to reinforce the call centers if the expected increase in calls begins.

As part of preparations for all scenarios in recent weeks, the Agency purchased satellite phones and distributed them to Jewish leaders in numerous communities to allow them to stay in touch with the outside world, even if phone and Internet lines are cut off.

With the understanding that massive civilian traffic is expected on the roads, and in the absence of air travel (alongside the expected expansion of the battle zones), the Agency has also opened two facilities that can immediately accommodate hundreds of people at a time. The centers are intended for Aliyah candidates who need emergency housing for a transitional period. These facilities have been equipped with food, emergency equipment and all other necessities needed until the Olim depart for Israel. The Agency has the ability to take in these Olim in several rounds and, if necessary, can expand the scope of the facilities to accommodate an increase in numbers. Simultaneously, preparations are being made for what has been described as “the complex and sensitive aspects involved in taking Olim out of the country in a safe and coordinated manner, in accordance with conditions on the ground and in coordination with all the required bodies.”

The Agency is also engaged in assisting with the physical security of communities and community institutions and is accelerating the implementation of a program for the protection of Jewish facilities throughout Ukraine, through the Agency’s Security Assistance Fund. In addition, the Agency is preparing to distribute emergency security grants to 100 Jewish community organizations across the country. These additional funds are needed to upgrade protection and safety measures in the face of challenging realities such as preventing looting during wartime.

There are currently over 1,500 young people from Ukraine who are participating in Jewish Agency programs in Israel and whose families back home are under fire. The Agency is in close contact and providing support to these people, who include lone soldiers and participants on Masa, Naale and other programs; all of whom are naturally deeply concerned about their families in Ukraine.

In addition, more than 100 students from Russia and Ukraine, together with participants from other Russian-speaking countries are currently attending an Agency retreat in Hungary. These young people cannot return home due to the state of war. The Agency is extending their stay in Budapest and attempting to provide a caring and supportive environment.

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC)

Jewish Federations’ partner JDC reports “spiking humanitarian needs” among the nearly 40,000 poor Jews it supports in 1,000 locations around Ukraine. JDC is already providing extra essentials like food and medicine and has activated its emergency hotlines, volunteer corps, and network of Hesed social service centers to address emerging needs as events unfold. The organization says that it is also preparing to handle mass displacement, and deploy psychosocial support and increased aid to the most vulnerable.

In addition, to respond the significant movement of the population, the JDC has secured three safe facilities/shelters fleeing displaced Jews and setting up transportation to these safe locations. The JDC Europe team has been activated to arrange housing accommodations for displaced Jews fleeing to Eastern Europe.

JDC has mobilized their volunteer and professional phone network to scour their data base and proactively contact Jewish households to collect and verify their needs. For those who are unwilling or unable to evacuate, JDC is sustaining displaced Jews not in camps/shelters with basic necessities such as food and medicine. In addition, the situation has made thousands of people newly vulnerable and JDC is providing critical aid to these people as well.

In the months leading up to the current crisis, JDC was already addressing severe economic need among Ukraine's poorest Jews in the face of rising food, medicine, and utility prices. The organization has provided extra essentials to them.

World Ort

World ORT is involved in the lives of more than 8,000 people including students, teachers, staff and their families in Ukraine.

At present, all ORT schools in Ukraine are closed. As a result of the crisis, the organization is preparing to reinforce safety measures at all ORT schools in the country and to support students, teachers, and families, by providing emergency items including food with a long shelf-life, water, matches and lighters, batteries and portable chargers, bio-toilets, LED torches and walkie-talkies, first aid kits, and essential medicines. New security measures will include additional physical security protection at schools including increased armed guards on-site with more equipment; increased transportation (buses) to and from school when in-person learning resumes, as well as emergency transportation plans should the need arise; and first aid training for school staff and mental health counseling available for the students and teachers.

Other Jewish organizations operating in Ukraine are also providing updates and sharing information about urgent needs which have arisen since fighting commenced.

Jewish Federations have activated our emergency protocols and are working closely with the Government of Israel and our partners to do everything in our power to support efforts that ensure the safety and well-being of the entire Jewish community in Ukraine.

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