Volunteering to support humanitarian response in eastern Ukraine amidst the COVID-19 pandemic

Civilian casualties in eastern Ukraine just reached their highest levels since September 2019 as a result of the current health crisis caused by the Coronavirus. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), which has a well-established coordination mechanism, has become central to COVID-19 response in the country, supported by UN Volunteers.

National UN Volunteer Iryna Koval has been supporting OCHA as a Humanitarian Affairs Specialist since March 2019. Soon, she will start her new position as a coordination and monitoring consultant with the World Health Organization (WHO), a key partner in addressing COVID-19.

At the onset of the pandemic, OCHA and its partners re-oriented their work in eastern Ukraine to address the health emergency and the current need for humanitarian aid.
For OCHA, the opportunity to supplement our regular workforce with the expertise offered by UN Volunteers greatly enhances our capacity to ensure that humanitarian assistance is able to reach the conflict-weary population of eastern Ukraine. -- James Weatherill, Deputy Head of Office of OCHA in Ukraine

Ravaged by six years of armed conflict, Eastern Ukraine has a weakened health system and an ageing population. Even though the number of confirmed cases in conflict-torn Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts is relatively low (142 in areas under government control and 459 in areas beyond government control), quarantine measures, coupled with the limited capacity of health care facilities, puts more lives at risk.

With the number of COVID-19 cases on the rise and restrictive measures in place, humanitarian actors are adapting their current activities. They are setting new priorities for the COVID-19 response to ensure that life-saving assistance reaches those who need it the most.

Such assistance includes social, economic and medical support for vulnerable populations around the 'contact line,' where hostilities are intense. "For those of us working at OCHA, the COVID-19 crisis meant adjusting our approaches to coordinating and monitoring the humanitarian response," Iryna says.

During her time as a UN Volunteer with OCHA in Ukraine, Iryna became an integral member of the OCHA team. She provided invaluable support to our effort to coordinate humanitarian action in eastern Ukraine, with a particular focus on coordinated assessment and planning through her support of the Inter-cluster Coordination Group. --James Weatherill
Despite the pandemic, OCHA continues to do its best to ensure that people in need receive the assistance they deserve without putting its staff or beneficiaries at risk. Movement restrictions introduced to contain the spread of the virus create additional difficulties for humanitarian actors. Authorities need to grant access to people in need of support.

“While I was on my field visits to isolated settlements along the 'contact line' in Eastern Ukraine, I saw people who were scared, deserted and lacked access to basic health care. They depend on humanitarian aid for survival. These people have become even more vulnerable due to the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions. --Iryna Koval, national UN Volunteer

The OCHA team in Ukraine at the launch of the 2020 Humanitarian Response Plan in Kyiv last December. ©OCHA, 2019

In her work at OCHA, Iryna monitored, analyzed and reported on humanitarian needs and response in eastern Ukraine. She contributed to the development of key programme documents such as the 2020 Humanitarian Needs Overview and Humanitarian Response Plan. Iryna also provided administrative and operational support to the Inter-Cluster Coordination Group, a group that works to facilitate a coherent response to the humanitarian crisis in eastern Ukraine.
My experience as a UN Volunteer has enhanced my understanding of humanitarian issues and helped me acquire new skills. As I begin my new role with WHO, the knowledge and skills I have gained will help me to contribute effectively to the COVID-19 response efforts. --Iryna Koval

When conflict broke out in eastern Ukraine in 2014, Iryna set up a non-governmental organization which helped with employment and social rehabilitation of internally-displaced persons fleeing conflict-affected regions. Iryna studied public administration, with a focus on conflict and security studies, for two years while working on international peace-related projects.

"Once I returned to Ukraine, I was determined to find a way to utilize my experience and knowledge to support people affected by the conflict in eastern Ukraine. The Humanitarian Affairs Specialist volunteer assignment at OCHA was a perfect fit. This role allowed me to combine my passion for humanitarian work and helping people caught in the conflict, with my long-lasting dream to work for the UN in a diverse international environment," says Iryna Koval, national UN Volunteer.

OCHA contributes to effective humanitarian response through the administration of humanitarian services. Since the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, OCHA has been working to facilitate the work of UN entities and national and international actors providing humanitarian assistance and protection services to people affected by the situation.

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