WAR IN UKRAINE: URGENT ACTION NEEDED TO PROTECT AND CARE FOR CHILDREN

The war in Ukraine is disrupting the lives of millions of children, denying their human rights, and driving families apart. All this is happening on top of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been jeopardizing children’s health, safety and education for two years.

The situation is particularly desperate for children who lack parental care, and many more children may lose it. Ukraine has more than 160,000 children who have lost parental care and live in different alternative care settings. They are exposed to the danger of ground battles and bombings, often without supportive adults by their side.

An entire generation of children risks growing up without the care they need.

Our staff on the ground could evacuate more than 400 children and caregivers in foster care programmes within the first week and bring them to safety in neighbouring countries like Poland and Romania. Yet, the war has shattered the child protection system. We are doing all we can, in partnership with governments and NGOs in Ukraine and other European countries, to help more children in vulnerable families and alternative care.

Among the most at risk are the almost 100,000 children in institutions such as orphanages and boarding schools. It was an established fact, even before the war, that institutional care can harm children’s wellbeing and development, as it lacks the nurturing care and emotional support of a family environment. During the current war, institutions are becoming alarmingly understaffed and challenged to provide primary care, psycho-social support, and assistance to children with disabilities. As a result, children in these settings are exposed to a heightened risk of violence and neglect and are isolated with very low chances to be evacuated.

In the midst of this humanitarian catastrophe, the SOS Children’s Villages federation stands united on the side of children.

We appeal for an immediate cessation of hostilities until a ceasefire has been negotiated. We ask to prioritize the care and protection of children and the respect of their human rights.

We also call on the international community and like-minded partners and supporters to join hands to ensure that children who have lost parental care and those at risk of losing it keep safe and receive the dedicated care they need.

We believe interventions should focus on the following five priorities:

1. **Maintenance of humanitarian corridors and enforcement of the rules of international humanitarian law in armed conflicts that are relevant to children** (particularly under the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention for the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War). According to the Ukrainian Child Rights Network, Russian troops on the territory of Ukraine did not provide the opportunity to evacuate the conflict-affected population, thus grossly violating the basic rights of children to life and survival. During the first sixteen days of the war, 78 children were killed, and 82 were injured. The international community shall hold armed forces to account for the targeting of civilians, especially in hospitals and childcare and education facilities, and ensure that this stops. We welcome recent agreements around humanitarian corridors and ask that all parties commit to allowing and facilitating regular avenues for civilians to flee the war.
2. **Immediate support and protection for children in institutions on the frontline in between the conflicting armed forces in Ukraine.**

Thousands of children are trapped in institutions in conflict zones without a parent or caregiver to give them loving care and protection. They are one of the most endangered groups, at high risk of neglect, violence and trafficking. In most cases, they have low chances to flee and struggle to receive basic resources. We have observed cases of children in institutions being abandoned as the care workers escaped the war and left them behind. We call on the international community to support the Ukrainian government in its obligations to protect these children and ensure that any measures taken to safely evacuate them are implemented in the best interests of each and every child and guarantee the highest safeguarding standards.

3. **Provision of vital humanitarian aid, including mental health and psycho-social support (MHPSS) to children affected by the war and their families or alternative care professionals, both within the Ukrainian territory and neighbouring countries.**

Access to food, shelter and medical care is precarious and must be guaranteed through humanitarian interventions. In addition to these basic services, MHPSS programmes aligned with the IASC Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support must be integrated into the emergency response as soon as possible. Our foster carers and psychologists reported that children have fear and anxiety. All children in distress need psycho-social support, both in Ukraine and in the countries hosting refugees.

4. **Provision of refuge and quality emergency care to all children and adults fleeing the war.**

The number of civilians fleeing their homes to seek protection keeps growing, and projections foresee four to seven million refugees (UNHCR and EU estimates). Many of them are children, with or without parents or custodial caregivers like kinship or foster carers. Our staff in neighbouring countries is working to provide care and protection to as many children as possible, and we are reaching out to partners to scale up our impact. Among the immediate needs on the ground are: (1) the creation of child-friendly spaces where children can play, learn and express themselves as they rebuild their lives; (2) interim alternative care in line with the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, for which professionals are needed to support children without parental care fleeing from Ukraine, including trained foster and residential care professionals, interpreters and psychologists; (3) protection of children's bonds with their family members or dedicated caregivers, including supporting the reunification process and avoiding the unnecessary separation of siblings when children have lost their parents and need placement in alternative care; (4) cash and voucher assistance to affected families; (5) MHPSS.

5. **Medium to long term plans for children to access their right to quality care and protection, both in Ukraine and in countries receiving displaced children. This includes reconstruction of disrupted child protection, alternative care and education systems.**

The situation of children in institutions in Ukraine left behind in the midst of the war shows the extreme vulnerability of children who have lost parental care in the absence of quality childcare and protection systems. SOS Children's Villages has been working with the national child rights network and the government of Ukraine towards a national deinstitutionalization strategy since 2016. But the war has abruptly interrupted childcare system reform.

The international community, governments and civil society must work together to provide children affected by the war with continuous access to quality alternative care, family strengthening and education as part of emergency responses, as well as longer-term plans to rebuild strong childcare and protection systems.

We welcome the recent EU decision to grant temporary protection in the EU to children, families and caregivers fleeing the conflict in Ukraine. This should be a clear impetus for ensuring protection of all children seeking refuge in the EU.
There is an urgency that all EU member states take immediate steps to share the responsibility to welcome and grant these children access to adequate care and essential services, including education and family and community-based alternative care, upon arrival and in the longer term. To this end, EU member states must substantially strengthen child protection in all procedures at the border and in countries of arrival by (1) taking measures to prevent violence, trafficking and the disappearance of children (2) investing in additional quality alternative care placements (3) restoring documentation, family tracing and family reunification, as long as it is in the best interests of the child (4) appointing qualified guardians, ensuring access to information and the right to be heard and (5) guaranteeing full access to services to all children as nationals, regardless of their status.

Last update: 17.03.2022