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Reporter's notebook: Delivering aid to residents in eastern Ukraine amid looming Russian artillery fire

by IAN EDWARDS 13 MINS READ — UPDATED: MAY 19, 2023 11:10 AM

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An individual inspects the damage done to civilian infrastructure following a Russian attack.

PREOBRAZHENKA, Ukraine – The van crests a small hill, revealing a wide expanse of dark rolling fields scattered with modest farmhouses. Kate, the aid worker sitting next to me, points out the passenger side window to a low green ridgeline a few kilometers away.

"The Russian positions are on the other side of those," she says.

Above us, the gray April sky threatens rain.

Next to Kate, our driver, Andrey, glances away from the road for a moment and looks at where she had been pointing.

At the start of our journey in Dnipro earlier in the morning, he'd been making jokes about how much he was looking forward to a holiday in the country. But now, after passing through two military checkpoints and with our destination almost in sight, he's quiet.

The mood in the van is more tense as we get closer to our destination, a village in the Zaporizhia region in southern Ukraine. The day before Preobrazhenka was shelled by Russian artillery and fresh attacks could come at any moment.

Behind us, the van's entire cargo space is filled of plastic sacks containing supplies to repair damaged buildings. They've been provided by Kate's organization, the New Zealand-based

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non-governmental organization ReliefAid. Together with Andrey's group, the Ukrainian charity KOLO Foundation, ReliefAid has organized the day's delivery of kits to residents of Preobrazhenka.

Ian Edwards

Residents wait in line to receive deliveries of humanitarian aid.

A few minutes after spotting the ridge that demarcates Ukrainian-occupied territory, we enter the village, a collection of modest, seemingly abandoned bungalows set closely together along narrow residential lanes.

Located about an hour's drive southeast of the city of Zaporizhia and only 15 kilometers from the front line, Preobrazhenka has been attacked relentlessly since the start of the full-scale invasion in February 2022, but it has never fallen under Russian control, unlike nearby cities in the region.

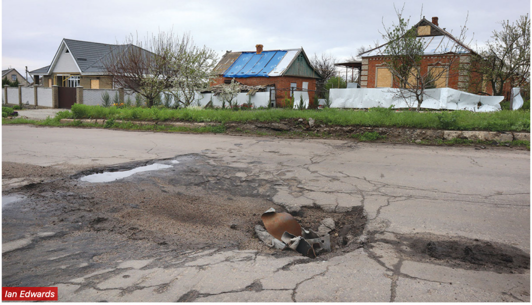
"You can see the damage caused by the shelling here," Kate says, pointing out the numerous houses whose roofs are covered with blue tarps. Some, with no roofs, emptily glare up at the sky.

Our route this day will take us to several stops in Preobrazhenka, where Kate and Andrey will deliver the repair kits directly to residents. In areas near the front, ReliefAid and KOLO prefer to operate in this way – delivering aid directly to residents – as it reduces the chance of being targeted by Russian attacks and prevents aid from being diverted by unscrupulous local officials and other interlopers.

Our first stop is at a two-story red brick building that houses the local government. Outside about a dozen people have already gathered. We hop out of the van and Kate and Andrey start talking with the locals. As they do, I hear volleys of artillery fire off in the distance, the first of many that ring out across Preobrazhenka.

After talking with residents, most of whom are of retirement age, we head inside city hall. There, I'm introduced to Natalya, a rosy-cheeked woman in her 40s who is the deputy head of the municipality.

"We're holding," she says with visible fatigue when I ask her about the situation in the village. "There was a lot of shelling yesterday, so we've lost electricity and are having to use a generator."



A crater in the road was left after a Russian projectile hit the area.

She tells me her administration has been distributing water to the residents and there's no gas. There used to be 5,000 people living in this district, she says, but now less than 1,000 remain. Natalya has already evacuated her mother to Zaporizhia but comes back each day to serve the residents and execute her official duties.

Explosions, some distant, some loud enough to make us flinch, continue to ring out during our conversation.

As we're talking, a graceful, elderly woman approaches the group. Maria Yevstafiivna introduces herself and tells us that she was born in Preobrazhenka in 1936 and has lived here all her life. She spent her career, 47 years, working as a deputy chief accountant on a local collective farm.

During the initial wave of the Russian invasion in the spring of 2022, Ms. Yevstafiivna's son evacuated her from the village and took her to stay in Zaporizhia. After returning home some time later, she'd discovered that the roof had been torn off her house and that it had been heavily damaged inside. In the living room, she'd pulled back a carpet that had fallen behind the sofa and discovered an unexploded shell stuck in the floor.

"Thank goodness no one was home," she says. "I ran here and called my neighbor. I asked him, 'What is it?'"

The neighbor told her they'd have to call a military demining team from Zaporizhia.

"So, I said, 'Call them. It's in the room. We can't have it like that.'"

A week later, the demining team came and removed the shell. Ms. Yevstafiivna says the deminers told her they'd found unexploded ordnance in many of the houses in Preobrazhenka.

"How can I live?" she says. "I can't live like that."

Natalya, the local official, adds, "Unfortunately, we have both shells that exploded and those that did not. A shell fell near my mother's house as well. We don't know whether it exploded or not."

Ms. Yevstafiivna goes off to collect an aid kit and we follow her outside.

Andrey wants to show me the former school, which stands about 100 meters away. On the walk over, we hear more shelling and I ask him whether it is incoming or outgoing. He says it's outgoing, meaning the Ukrainians are firing on the Russians from their positions outside the village.

Andrey has been to Preobrazhenka dozens of times, as the KOLO Foundation provides logistical support to many aid groups. Volunteering to drive to dangerous destinations like Preobrazhenka is just one of his duties with KOLO, which was founded before the war but has since reoriented itself to helping victims of the conflict.

A native of Gorlovka in the Donetsk region of Ukraine, Andrey now lives in Dnipro, where he works in the manufacturing industry. Though he left Donetsk before 2014, he had to evacuate his parents from the region after Russian troops invaded his hometown.

The school is intact but empty, the bright yellow and green facade has been damaged by shrapnel and the windows are all boarded up with plywood. Russian artillery hit it some time ago and left it unusable, depriving the 25 or so Ukrainian children still left in the village of a place to learn.

In front of the school is a petite elderly woman wearing a bright yellow scarf around her head. She's cutting up a branch that has fallen from a nearby tree with a small hand saw. The nights are still cold in this area in mid-April, and with utilities unreliable due to attacks, local residents are forced to find sources of fuel for their wood stoves where they can.

On our return to city hall, Andrey points out a crater in the middle of a nearby street with an intact shell casing in the center of it. It's an example of the kind of unexploded ordinance that litter the area.

Back at the van, a queue of about 15 people has formed. They are given bulky white plastic sacks. Inside are plastic tarps and sheets, thermal blankets, a solar-powered lamp and various tools like hammers, saws, nails and pliers.

ShelterBox, a British aid group that provides supplies to people affected by disasters, has donated more than 6,000 of these kits to Ukraine. ReliefAid has received 2,000 of those and has spent the past month making two to four trips per week to distribute them throughout the south and east of the country.

Ian Edwards

An elderly woman cuts fallen wood to burn to heat her home.

Two days earlier, Kate and Andrey drove four hours each way to Kramatorsk in the Donetsk region to make deliveries there. In a place like Preobrazhenka, they're services are in high demand.

After the aid workers finish handing out more than a dozen of the kits, we say good-bye. After a short drive down the village's main road, we find another crowd waiting for us.

The distribution is again commenced as the sound of shelling continues in the distance. Sergey Mikhailovich, a long-time resident of the village, says he has a wife at home who is ill with diabetes. He says there has been a lot of shelling recently and that it has been difficult for her.

Villagers take sacks away however they can, some carry them by hand, others perch them precariously on bicycles, a few load them up into the trunks of their cars and one woman carts hers away in a wheelbarrow.

We pile back into the van and drive a narrow street lined with houses that stand behind low wooden fences. Beds of brightly blooming red and yellow tulips line the street, adding an almost surreal touch of color to an otherwise forlorn scene.

A crowd of people similar in size to those at the previous locations awaits us. At this stop, one of the local residents, a middle-aged woman with long dark hair, assists Kate and Andrey in organizing the queue. As they work, the sound of shelling grows louder and more frequent. Explosions are heard a few times per minute.

“We've got to hurry up,” Kate tells me as she checks names off a list. “They're telling me there's going to be a counterattack from the Russians soon.”

Moving quickly, we distribute the last of the aid within a few minutes. While Andrey finishes clearing out the now empty van, Kate chats in Ukrainian to a woman with dark hair.

Suddenly, the woman bursts into tears. Kate takes the time to comfort her while the shelling continues relentlessly in the distance. Not more than a few minutes later, Andrey signals that it's time to go. We quickly say good-bye and hop into the van.

“It's better we don't stick out for what happens next,” Kate tells me as Andrey guides the van to the edge of the village. The shelling we'd heard earlier had mostly been the Ukrainians firing; now the Russians would respond, she says.

Back on the highway to Zaporizhia, Andrey is clearly determined to get us out of the area as quickly as possible. All told, we've delivered 60 aid kits to the inhabitants of Preobrazhenka.

Kate tells me that the woman who began crying had a sister who recently died and that both her nephew and son are fighting with the Ukrainian military in Bakhmut, currently the site of the fiercest battle of the war.

People living in hard-hit areas like Preobrazhenka can at first sight appear to be very stoic, she says, but it's often just a facade that crumbles the moment she asks them how they're doing. The amount of stress they live with daily is incredibly high, she says.

Like Andrey, Kate was born in the Donetsk region, though she now lives in England, where she works in finance and runs a construction business with her husband. Despite having a comfortable life in a safe country, she felt a desire to help Ukraine and begin a month-long engagement with ReliefAid. She hasn't been able to visit her hometown since the war began in 2014. She still has family there.

On the highway back to Zaporizhia, the van passes through the village of Komyshuvakha, where a group of emergency services workers are standing next to a ruined one-story building that appears to have been recently shelled. When we get back to Dnipro in the late afternoon, we agree to meet again the next morning to make another trip out to another village.

After a night's rest, we're on the road again to deliver more aid kits to Pokrovske, about 50 kilometers to the northeast of Preobrazhenka in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast. A television crew from Dnipro has joined us. I ride with Margot, Yan and Vlad for the two-hour drive through the countryside down bumpy, pothole-filled roads.

The situation is much calmer and quieter in Pokrovske. As more aid kits are handed, the television crew interviews the locals. After everyone has finished, we all go to a warehouse on the edge of the village that was attacked the previous summer.

The caretaker of the site tells us that on August 22, 2022, the facility was hit by a number of Russian missiles. Though the area has been cleaned up, the destruction is massive and near total, with only a few damaged buildings left standing.

"There used to be 10 warehouses of wheat here," the caretaker says. "It was blown all over the territory."

Several people who were there at the time of the attack were injured, but no one was killed, he says. Houses in the area were damaged as well by the blast, which sent pieces of the concrete roof flying for hundreds of meters into a nearby residential neighborhood.

I ride again with the journalists back to Dnipro. On the way, I ask Yan, the camera operator, about the yellow-and-blue Ukrainian flag he has tattooed on the side of his neck, just below the metal tryzub, or Ukrainian trident, earring that he also wears. He tells me with a smile that he got the tattoo for his 42nd birthday.

I think back to Mariia and the unexploded artillery shell behind her sofa as well as all the other people in Preobrazhenka who are still living under the threat of shelling and invasion. Looking at Yan's tattoo, I realize that I can't help but see it as a symbol of the Ukrainian spirit, one that refuses to give up or be afraid despite the current hardships its people are suffering.

For the rest of the ride back to Dnipro, Yan blasts rock and pop music at high volume on the car's stereo and I stare out the window at the passing fields, where the first green shoots of spring are just beginning to poke through the intense black soil that stretches out all the way to the distant horizon.

Ian Edwards is a freelance journalist and writer based in Ukraine.

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