

No end in sight

Kiwis delivering aid in Ukraine and Palestine fear the resilience of locals is waning. But that won't stop them trying to help.

BY LAWRENCE WATT

Aucklander Mike Seawright travels to Ukraine often enough that he is used to the nightly noise that freaks out newcomers. On his latest mission, he has just left Kyiv, where Russian ballistic missiles and guided bombs are exploding nightly. "Every night, I'm awakened by air raid sirens, by air defence systems, or by the explosions themselves."

Ukrainians' ironlike morale, which superficially looks high, is now tumbling, says the executive director of ReliefAid, which he founded a decade ago to deliver aid in conflict zones.

"On the surface, people appear normal, but when you scratch through the veneer, they are literally crying. They are scared for themselves and for their future.

"Ukrainians feel they are abandoned. Interest from the wider public, worldwide, has fallen, and we're getting less money to help them."

Ukraine is currently ReliefAid's biggest operation. The donor-funded agency provides everything from materials for rebuilding bombed homes to food and medicines. Firms provide trucks and machines to transfer goods for free. Materials are bought in Ukraine at cost and taken to towns and cities such as Kharkiv, near the border. "A mayor spent literally a whole day unloading bags of cement," says Seawright, a former aid diplomat and businessman. "The other side is that a forklift can turn up and unload the truck in an hour."

Despite the Ukrainian army's foray into Russia's southwestern Kursk region in August and its drone attacks on Moscow, Seawright says the continued aerial attacks, the Russian breakthrough near Kharkiv, and the possibility of Donald Trump returning to the White House have made Ukrainians question their future. For some, it is a feeling of déjà vu. Many may have to leave their homes a second time if the current Russian advance continues.

"Families who have moved back in are moving out again, away from the border, or are leaving the country altogether. People are afraid the line will not be held ... Everyone talks tough, but they don't have a choice. They just have to carry on. They are not ready to give up, but they can't see the end of this war."

This assessment is similar to July last year, when the *Listener* last spoke with Seawright about ReliefAid's work in Ukraine and elsewhere. This time, he is visiting Kharkiv, just 40km from the Russian border, and staying with Karla, a Ukrainian businessman. A few minutes before our call, they hear a whirring sound near the window. A small missile, fired from across the border, whizzes by – "a terror attack to scare people," Seawright says.

They were fairly unfazed as it landed elsewhere with a thud – recorded on his phone. Karla's house was hit by a similar missile a year ago. "It didn't explode, but still did a lot of damage," Seawright says. This has been repaired but Karla is grieving



for his dog, killed during a recent "massive drone attack" near his house. The drones make an annoying buzzy noise. "The dog went crazy, it ran round and round and choked itself on its own leash," Seawright says.

Karla's family is okay; his wife is visiting their daughter in Germany. But the Russian bombing of power stations has hurt his women's clothing business, which employs 60 people. With the power on for only two hours a day, production is a mess.

CONSTANT BOMBING

The Palestinian territories of Gaza and the West Bank are other trouble spots where ReliefAid and other agencies including



Médecins sans Frontières work. With Gaza's borders shut, local bore water is about the only clean drinking water Palestinians have. "Gaza will be bombed every day for the foreseeable future," he says.

Israeli bombing has damaged power, water and sewage plants and pipes, causing an epidemic of water-borne diseases. Many have to resort to drinking from open, polluted pools. Polio has returned, forcing the United Nations to vaccinate people.

"The next water-borne disease will be cholera. This is why we focus on delivering clean water – trucking it inland from wells near the coast."

Despite the costly fuel and road blocks, "our aid programme, delivering water and

helping kids, is continuous". The price of diesel has hit NZ\$41 a litre plus duty, (its about \$2/1 here). With such high costs, and the public getting tired of the fallout from the wars, Seawright took a quick flight to Canada, to "shake the [money] tin" at friends and business donors. This worked.

"Today, we have distributed water to

“
Ukrainians feel they are abandoned. Interest from the wider public, worldwide, has fallen.

Caption

4000 people. We could multiply that to 40,000 people a day if we had the money."

ReliefAid also operates in Syria, following the February 2023 earthquakes, and in Afghanistan. It recently started an education programme for displaced Palestinian children in Gaza based on its successful Syrian programme. Called Bounceback, it is run remotely – when the internet works – from New Zealand by volunteer Bernadette Stockman, a former principal of St Mary's College in Auckland. The programme works through educational play for children who the war has taken away



Siobhan Lockie, right, and colleague Noura Arafat at the Médecins sans Frontières mental health clinic in Nablus, West Bank.

from school. Seawright, meanwhile, plans to return to Ukraine after further fundraising in the US and Canada.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AID

Hardly surprisingly, Israel's war against Palestine has taken a huge emotional toll on ordinary people. Clinical psychologist Siobhan Lockie has returned to Christchurch after 10 months working for Médecins Sans Frontières in a psychological therapy clinic in the West Bank town of Nablus. Her Palestinian clients included people who had lost their loved ones, their homes and their jobs to Israeli military strikes.

Lockie shared with the *Listener* several stories about people she helped. For confidentiality reasons, their names are withheld. She recalls treating a class of boys who had lost a friend, shot dead by an Israeli soldier on his way home. The boys talked through their loss.

"The boys had different ways of managing their grief," she says. Some said they should harden up and forget about him, others wanted to remember their friend. Eventually, they decided to keep his photo in the classroom, because "for them, it was important to keep the memory of him going".

All felt they should keep working hard

on their schoolwork, as academic success is part of a strategy to make themselves and their country smarter and stronger.

For decades, many Palestinian workers have commuted to work in Israel. After the current war began, Lockie says Israeli authorities arrested about 10,000 men heading to work. They confiscated their passports, cash and cellphones, then released them. By then, many were displaced, due to Israeli evacuation orders or bombing.

Lockie often worked with groups of up to 10 people, many of whom had lost relatives. One man found his father was missing and assumed he was probably dead. His wife was eight months pregnant and he was constantly looking at his phone, whenever the power was turned on. This man would vomit whenever he tried to drink, so had to stop eating and drinking. She worked closely with him; they treated his problem as if he was returning to normal eating after



The man had recently completed rebuilding his house. But the Israeli military levelled it again.

Ramadan. He began by eating just one date, and gradually ate more. He was then able to go for walks, and she encouraged him to control his breathing. Eventually, he phoned his family and found his father was alive and well and his wife was okay.

Another man had a lot of anger arising from worry and loss, she says. Family members had been killed and he had recently completed rebuilding his house, which was destroyed by Israeli forces in 2021. But the Israeli military levelled the house again, just like thousands of homes in Palestine. "He became very restless. People gave him a very wide berth," she says. Eventually, the man told her he had got a job, and he no longer needed any help.

It was exhausting work, and Lockie still worries about her colleagues' safety. "I learnt something from everyone I met," she says. "One local colleague kept working, despite having to drive up to five hours to work." Some were themselves displaced by Israeli attacks, including from their destroyed homes.

As for how she copes, "I practice what I preach."

Lockie cut her teeth helping people after the Christchurch mosques massacre. But she can't forget her West Bank friends and colleagues, whom she knows are still on the physical and emotional front line. ■

For more information, visit reliefaid.org.nz