



UKRAINE: HUMANITARIAN CATASTROPHE IN IZIUM

THE PLIGHT OF CIVILIANS UNDER BOMBARDMENT AND SIEGE-LIKE
CONDITIONS

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BACKGROUND

On 24 February, the Russian armed forces began an open invasion of Ukraine, which Amnesty International considers an act of aggression. On 3 March 2022, Ukraine and Russia first agreed to establish humanitarian corridors for civilian evacuation, however implementation has been very limited. Moreover, several Ukrainian cities and towns are living in conditions approximating a siege, with the possibility of civilians departing and humanitarian aid delivery severely restricted due to virtually perpetual shelling.

One situation emblematic of the plight of civilians living under siege-like conditions is that of Iziium, a small town with population of around 56,000 people in Kharkiv Region in eastern Ukraine. Iziium has not made it into the main news headlines, yet for over two weeks the town has been on the edge of a humanitarian catastrophe.

The first reports of the Russian military attacks on the town of Iziium appeared on 28 February 2022, according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine. Videos and photographs taken by the locals and verified by Amnesty International's Crisis Evidence Lab demonstrate residential buildings damaged by Russian attacks. At night on 3 March, as a result of mass strikes by the Russian armed forces, residential areas in Ukrayinska, Proletarska, Soborna, Dontsia, Zakhazhevskoho, Heroiv Chornobyltsiv, and Staroposhtova streets were damaged, as well as the building of the Iziium district police precinct.¹

Eight civilians were killed, including at least two children, according to media reports.² Verified footage from the early hours of 3 March shows extensive damage to buildings along Soborna street, including a bank, residential apartments, and shops. The central town hospital was also hit by a strike and, as confirmed by verified video, one wing was significantly damaged. At the moment of the attack, the sick and the wounded were in the basement, according to the deputy Iziium town Mayor, Volodymyr Matsokin.³ Most of the residential areas of the town were cut off from electricity, gas, heating, and mobile communication as a result of attacks.

Intense strikes restricted or often prevented the evacuation of civilians or delivery of humanitarian assistance. Evacuees reported that most of the shops were destroyed or had to close down. According to Oleg Synegubov, Head of the Kharkiv Regional Military Administration, in early March Russian troops tried to enter the town, but they could not take over and continued to keep Iziium effectively under siege.⁴ On 9 March, due to intense attacks, the authorities managed to evacuate only 250 persons, instead of the planned 5,000.⁵ On 10 March, another group of up to 2,000 people were evacuated.⁶ Along with local authorities, local volunteers and activists used private cars to evacuate civilians, taking immense risk themselves. They operate without adequate funding, security arrangements or psychological support.

Despite evacuation efforts, many local residents, including children, older people and people with disabilities, remain in the basements and shelters of Iziium. Their living conditions are dire, their food and water supplies are running out or have already been exhausted. Iziium urgently needs a humanitarian corridor to enable safe evacuation of civilians wishing to leave, and delivery of humanitarian supplies to those who remain behind.

On 8-12 March Amnesty International interviewed 26 residents of Iziium immediately after their evacuation. Their testimonies describe the catastrophic conditions in Iziium. The situation on the ground is rapidly deteriorating, and the conditions described in this briefing reflect the situation at the time the interviewees were evacuated from Iziium.

The purpose of this document is to draw attention to the plight of civilians of the largely-forgotten towns in Ukraine, caught in the fighting or finding themselves under siege by Russian forces and facing increasingly dire humanitarian conditions, and to urge the international community to intensify efforts in pursuit of viable humanitarian corridors for civilians able to flee and humanitarian access to those who stay behind.

¹ Office Of the Prosecutor General Of Ukraine, "Авіаційний обстріл міста ізюм на харківщині - розпочаті кримінальні провадження", Official Telegram Channel, 3 March 2022, Available At https://t.me/Pgo_Gov_Ua/3025.

² "В ізюмі кількість жертв обстрілу зросла до восьми", ukraineform, 3 march 2022, available at <https://www.ukrainform.ua/rubric-ato/3418653-v-izumi-kilkist-zertv-obstrilu-zrosla-do-vosmi.html>

³ Volodymyr Matsokin, Post on Facebook, 8 March 2022, available at <https://www.facebook.com/volodymyr.matsokin/posts/7675042065901336>.

⁴ Oleg Synegubov, Head of Kharkiv Regional State Administration, on Facebook, 8 March 2022, available at <https://www.facebook.com/100044020894667/videos/4898838953497269/>

⁵ Denys Karlovskiy, "З ізюма не змогли евакуювати 5 тисяч мешканців через сильні обстріли окупантів", *Ukrayinska Pravda*, 9 March 2022, available at <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2022/03/9/7329827/>

⁶ Telegram channel Operativnyi ZSU (оперативний ЗСУ), with reference to Oleg Synegubov, head of Kharkiv regional state administration, 10 march 2022, available at <https://t.me/operativnozsu/12586>.

STRIKES ON RESIDENTIAL AREAS

All interviewees told us that the Russian forces conducted attacks that destroyed or damaged civilian infrastructure, including residential houses, schools, kindergartens, medical facilities, and food stores.

Svitlana, aged 72, an IDP originally from Donetsk, stated:

When they began to bomb us, on March 3 or 4, we couldn't go outside anymore. Day and night rockets were being shot... If this continues for a few more days, the people and the town will be finished off. Our town is being wiped off the face of the earth.⁷

Another IDP originally from Donetsk, 75-year-old Liudmyla who lived in a rented room, confirmed:

Horrendous shelling was ongoing every day, windows were broken in my room, and other peoples' flats were destroyed to zero. In the town centre nothing was spared, not a single kiosk, not a single shop, everything was levelled.⁸

Some residential neighbourhoods with individual family houses seem to be among the most damaged. According to Natalia from the Nyzhnie Misto neighborhood, whose house is near the sanitation station:

The neighbourhood with single-family homes is under tremendous shelling... When you're outside immediately you're under fire... Today we said good-bye to life, we saw that houses around are all on fire, and ours was still standing, so we understood that we'll be the next target.⁹

Maksym, who evacuated from Iziium on 10 March, said that his flat was bombed in the very first days. His family went down to the basement, while strikes continued for up to 15 hours intermittently, he said.¹⁰ Natalia from Pokrovska Street said that their five-story building was burning, while its residents continued hiding in its basement. They wasted all their water supplies trying to stop the fire. The fire department was unable to help under such heavy attacks.¹¹ Oleksandr, who evacuated on 11 March, witnessed a similar situation in Khlibozavodska street. He said that the building was burning, people were screaming for help, but shooting continued. It was impossible to help them or to put out the fire as there was no water in town. Oleksandr insisted that the civilians were intentionally targeted:

When bread or water is being brought, people start gathering around the truck and they [the Russian forces] start shelling, ... as long as people start queuing for bread, shells are hitting them... The truck stays 5-10 minutes and goes, this is understandable, people [truck drivers] also want to survive.¹²

The strikes were so persistent and intense that it was often impossible for people to get out of the shelters and come up to their flats to fetch food, water, or clothes. "Especially on 9 and 10 March the mass strikes were uninterrupted, our house was bulging at the seams, we were unable to go up to take any stuff from our homes or walk our dogs," said Andriy, who evacuated from Iziium on 11 March. He also remembered how once he wanted to take something from his garage, located a four-minute walk from the basement. "Intense fire had started, and I ended up staying nine hours in the basement of the garage, unable to get out."¹³

LIFE IN THE BASEMENTS

The intensity of the attacks has pushed civilians into basements. According to the interviewees, there are hardly any equipped shelters in the town, people are hiding in the basements of their houses or the nearby schools, which are insufficiently safe, overcrowded and lacks sanitation. Sometimes people move from one basement to another, hoping to find better protection. Maryna who managed to escape to Svyatohirsk several days earlier speaks of her parents:

My parents are sitting there in the cellar with no communication with the outside world. This is a small basement that is not meant for living. It's an ordinary basement, not a bomb shelter, there is no real protection... They sit in a small room, where they also relieve themselves.¹⁴

⁷ Svitlana, in interview with Amnesty International, on 9 March 2022, over the phone. Full name known to Amnesty International but not disclosed for security considerations.

⁸ Liudmyla, in interview with Amnesty International, on 10 March 2022, over the phone. Full name not disclosed for security considerations.

⁹ Natalia, in interview with Amnesty International, on 11 March 2022, over the phone. Full name not disclosed for security considerations.

¹⁰ Maksym, in interview with amnesty international, on 10 March 2022, over the phone. Full name not disclosed for security considerations.

¹¹ Natalia, in interview with Amnesty International, on 11 March 2022, over the phone.

¹² Oleksandr, in interview with Amnesty International, on 11 March 2022, over the phone. Full name not disclosed for security considerations.

¹³ Andriy, in interview with Amnesty International, on 11 March 2022, over the phone. Full name known to a Amnesty International but not disclosed for security considerations.

¹⁴ Maryna, in interview with Amnesty International, on 9 March 2022, over the phone. Full name is not disclosed for security considerations.

Maryna has not had any information about her parents for a few days now, as all communications are cut off in Iziium:

We were in a shelter under the school building, 270 people, a quarter of them were children, the rest are all adults... Everybody was sitting on each other's heads. Our property in the basement was two chairs and a desk. The only advantage was that because there were 270 people it was warm inside. In other basements it was very cold.¹⁵

Svitlana, the IDP originally from Donetsk quoted earlier, also added that basement residents used the school toilet, and due to the water shortage, men were collecting snow into bins and melting the snow to use as water for the toilet.

Iziium residents were cut off from electricity, gas, heating and any means of communication.

We didn't have gas, water or electricity. We tried to find a cellphone connection, but it wasn't available. It is not clear whether the phone signal was blocked, or the communication lines were destroyed. Some guys told us the phone signal was blocked intentionally because none of the mobile providers were functional. Only once were we able to call our relatives.¹⁶

People's food security was dependent on whether they managed to make sufficient stores before the crisis and whether they were able to access these stores. "We managed to buy some food before the bombing. Food was scarce. Neighbours shared whatever they had between themselves," said Sofiya from Klenovaya Street.¹⁷

We spent six days in the cellar, it's very small, you have to stand in it, it's impossible to lie down. As soon as there was a pause [in strikes] we would quickly run out, get some eggs from the hens, drink these eggs. Our child was hungry since we hardly ate. All we had was leftover dry bread, apples from the cellar, canned pickles, and jam. We opened cans for the child. We couldn't get any other food anywhere; we couldn't leave our house. Everything was under fire!¹⁸

Serhiy from Pivdenna street said that the last time he had managed to buy food was 10 days ago (around 1 March):

Then everything was closed. We took rusks from home and ate them. We went to the neighbours, their door and windows were blown out, we took salo [lard] and other things from their refrigerator. After evacuation I called the neighbour and apologized for this.¹⁹

Artem, who had shrewdly stockpiled some supplies for his family and was hiding in a fitness centre located in the basement of a five-story building, was unable to access his stocks, despite the enormous risks that he took to reach them:

One bottle of water was left and that's it. I freaked out and decided to take the risk and go home. It was one kilometre away from my fitness centre. As I was walking, I heard a drone buzzing above my head. It was following me, a little scout plane. Why do I care, I keep on walking. I reached the central polyclinic and here the artilleries started to exchange fire. Russians were positioned roughly at the entrance to the town, behind the railway station market and the railway station. Our chaps [Ukrainian forces] were positioned at Kremyanets. They had a real duel, firing at each other. All of their stuff was flying over me. All along my way. When there were 400 metres left [to my home] I started to see shells falling on my way and a couple of houses were on fire... I understood that it was suicidal to go farther... and I started to walk back.²⁰

While the electricity was still on, people used multi-cookers or the bravest went up to their homes and tried to cook for themselves and others. When the electricity was cut, people ate cold food or tried to make bonfires in the courtyards. This was, however, often impossible due to heavy strikes.

Humanitarian aid and some bread were delivered to the town sporadically, but due to shortages and the lack of telecommunications the aid only reached some civilians but not others. The situation seemed better in bigger shelters, often those located in schools.

Volunteers knew about them and delivered food when they could. Roman, a 45-year-old man with a disability who stayed in the basement of school N5 at the Independence Avenue explained:

The volunteers organized borscht once a day. But it was served in very small portions, half of a standard portion, so that everybody could get a little. It was borscht and two small pieces of bread per person.²¹

Bread was delivered to Iziium when the attacks died down, however, only some residents could access this aid. Roman told us on 9 March:

The most recent time they brought bread to the monument to Volokh on [Independence] prospect was three days ago, 6 March. I went out to get bread yesterday at 9am, there was a crowd of people standing there. But instead of bread there were two air raids. Everybody ran away.

¹⁵ Svitlana, in interview with Amnesty International, on 9 March 2022, over the phone.

¹⁶ Sofiya, in interview with Amnesty International, on 9 March 2022, over the phone. Full name is not disclosed for security considerations.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Natalia, in interview with Amnesty International, on 11 March 2022, over the phone.

¹⁹ Serhiy, in interview with Amnesty International, on 12 March 2022, over the phone. Full name known to Amnesty International but not disclosed for security considerations.

²⁰ Artem, in interview with Amnesty International, on 11 March 2022, over the phone. Full name is not disclosed for security considerations.

²¹ Roman, in interview with Amnesty International, on 9 March 2022, over the phone. Full name is not disclosed for security considerations.

The Publik supermarket near the monument to Volokh was damaged, the windows were shattered. Today there was no bread either. It was empty and cold. There were people here and there standing in groups of two or three, waiting, but the bread never came.²²

Water is an even bigger problem. In many places water supplies are nearly exhausted. “When we were leaving [evacuating], there were three five-litre containers left for 55 people. I don’t know how they are going to survive,” said Tetyana, who stayed in the shelter at Klenova street with her five-month-old baby.²³

Due to lack of water, it was hard to maintain the baby’s hygiene. At first, we had water. We got some water into containers, we warmed it up on a bonfire and rinsed the baby. But the water was gone in 2-3 days. We started to use wet napkins to wipe her. She was allergic to the napkins but there was nothing to do. Thank God, I had baby food. I had one kilo of baby food left and 50 diapers when volunteers evacuated us.²⁴

Many people emphasized how cold it was in the cellars. Tetyana described: “It was very cold, the temperature in the basement was below zero, we were wrapping ourselves in blankets, we were covering doors with blankets to somehow preserve the warmth.”²⁵

According to Oleksandr: “People are sitting without hot meals, they can’t drink even simple tea. They are taking water, holding bottles in their hands to warm up and then drink, because it is very cold.”²⁶

However, evacuees explained that solidarity helped people to endure. Residents organized themselves to help others, to clean the basements, to cook, they took turns giving each other a chance to rest, and kept each other’s spirits up during the strikes. Svitlana said: “When the bombing started, adults would start playing with children, offer them different games to distract them. Small kids were told that this was a landslide coming.”²⁷

Numerous interviewees praised volunteers who took enormous personal risks to evacuate civilians from under the shelling and bombs, to bring food and water into the town.

OLDER PEOPLE AND PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

People with disabilities and older people have faced particular difficulties in seeking shelter during attacks. Many of our respondents said that they know of people with serious health conditions with very little mobility who could not be transferred to the basements, and they remained in their flats under heavy strikes. There was no medical help available, the only medicines people could use were the ones they had at home.

Lots of older people [with limited mobility] remained in the houses... They have no food, they are dying there!... I know of an older woman who is lying in the bathtub. Relatives could not take her out under the Grad. Today a man went to bring food to his relative who has a health condition, he was shot in his leg. We were cleaning and covering his wound.²⁸

Viktoria told us of an older man, who remained in his flat on Nadozerna street. She was also concerned that people with hearing loss cannot hear the announcements of evacuation in the streets and are unable to call for help.²⁹

In our basement was a man with very limited mobility. He was brought in yesterday. Before that he was staying in his flat with broken window glasses. He survived a stroke and had a very complicated leg fracture, he cannot walk.³⁰

Roman, a man with disability, said that he had spent his last day and night before the evacuation at home as the harsh conditions of the basement became too unbearable for him, and he had got sores from sitting on the chair in the same position.

For 10 days we sat on chairs in the shelter, and people’s legs got so swollen that they could no longer walk. We could not go into a horizontal position because of a lack of space... Older people were the only ones who could lay down for the night. The rest sat. My legs swelled up, I’m disabled, with diabetes and hypertension, and I could simply not stay there any longer. I was in such a state I could just fall down on the floor as if in delirium. I decided that whatever happens, and went home.³¹

²² Ibid.

²³ Tetyana, in interview with Amnesty International, on 9 March 2022, over the phone. Full name is not disclosed for security considerations.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Oleksandr, in interview with Amnesty International, on 11 March 2022, over the phone.

²⁷ Svitlana, in interview with Amnesty International, on 9 March 2022, over the phone.

²⁸ Maryna, in interview with Amnesty International, on 9 March 2022, over the phone. Full name is not disclosed for security considerations.

²⁹ Viktoria, in interview with Amnesty International, on 11 March 2022, over the phone. Full name is not disclosed for security considerations.

³⁰ Natalia, in interview with Amnesty International, on 11 March 2022, over the phone.

³¹ Roman, in interview with Amnesty International, on 9 March 2022, over the phone. Full name is not disclosed for security considerations.

81-year-old Faina Anatoliivna spent a week in the shelter together with her dog, Milka. She said that she was born during the Second World War and even then, there was no such destruction in Iziium. “I am calm, I was not worried about myself”, but it was hard for her to see “small children having bombs fall on their heads, [see] the disabled and the injured.”³²

PROTECTION FOR DISPLACED IZIUM RESIDENTS

Evacuations are very risky for Iziium residents and their helpers. The civilians Amnesty International interviewed were evacuated to Svyatohirsk, a town in Donetsk Region previously a local tourism and recreation destination. For those who has made it across, concerns about their future security and health remain.

A member of a local charity that has organized volunteers for the evacuation, explains:

There’s a huge shortage of medicine here. There has always been only one dispensary in Svyatohirsk, with two heroic doctors. And all tests, all examinations were carried out in Slavyansk, Kramatorsk, Kharkiv and other cities. Now it’s impossible. The arriving IDPs need special medications, insulin, specific drugs. Pharmacies are empty, there are no medications. Women have cystitis, they have been sitting in the basements for a long time, we don’t have such medications here. Those who are on insulin, say they have enough insulin left for a day or two, and then what? And we also need antiepileptic drugs, other specific drugs – it’s impossible to get them.³³

Another big concern is safety.

Svyatohirsk is very small and logistically very dangerous. It’s the transport junction connecting Luhansk and Donetsk regions and Kharkiv. There are lots of displaced people who arrived here from other towns in recent days. We have a dangerously large number of people here, lots of older people, people with disabilities. There is a problem with sending money here, it is very hard to deliver food products. We can have another Mariupol or Iziium here soon. There are no first-aid kits and tourniquets for wounded people are impossible to find. There are no hemostatic agents. There are no surgeons, people here will simply die en masse if anything happens.³⁴

Artem, an owner of a fitness club in Iziium, says he cannot imagine what his next steps will be. There is a shortage of fuel at petrol stations in Svyatohirsk, he is not even able to buy gas and drive his family farther into safer areas in Ukraine:

How will I live? How will I feed my child? Will I be able to earn money in the next year or two? Who will rebuild this town, when will it have water and heating? I can’t think about such things yet. I am happy that I was able to take a hot shower today. For now, I don’t have hope.³⁵

VIOLATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

International humanitarian law prohibits attacks against civilians and civilian objects, indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks. Attacking forces must take all feasible precautions to spare civilians and civilian objects. This means that they should avoid the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects, such as artillery, mortars, and unguided bombs, in the vicinity of concentrations of civilians. The use of inherently indiscriminate weapons such as cluster munitions is prohibited in all circumstances. The use of starvation of the civilian population as a method of warfare and attacking objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population are prohibited. The parties must allow and facilitate rapid and unimpeded passage of impartial humanitarian relief for civilians in need. The parties must also take all feasible precautions to protect the civilian population under their control from the effects of attacks, including by avoiding, to the extent feasible, locating military objectives within or near densely populated areas. Launching direct attacks on civilians or civilian objects, disproportionate attacks, and indiscriminate attacks that kill or injure civilians are war crimes.

The Russian military must immediately stop unlawful attacks, grant humanitarian relief organizations access to all civilians in Iziium and other Ukrainian cities and towns under their control or besieged by their forces. The parties must agree on establishing well-planned, safe humanitarian corridors and respect such agreements in good faith; civilians, including older people and people with disabilities, must be provided accessible transportation as well as sufficient time to safely exit. And international observers should be granted access to monitor their safe passage.

³² Faina Anatoliivna, in interview with Amnesty International, on 9 March, over the phone. Full name known to Amnesty International but not disclosed for security considerations.

³³ A member of staff from a local NGO, in interview with Amnesty International, on 8 March 2022, over the phone. The name of the organization and full name of the interviewee known to Amnesty International but not disclosed for security considerations.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Artem, in interview with Amnesty International, on 11 March 2022, over the phone.

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