

British Humanitarian Aid Annual Report 2015-2016

Having just had a quick look at last year's report, one could almost cut and paste the opening paragraphs into this year's! Anyway, Crimea remains annexed, (with Donald Trump now suggesting that Putin's actions were acceptable!) and the armed confrontation with the pro Russian separatists in the Eastern Regions continues with a steadily rising number of deaths and serious injuries.

While both Russia and Ukraine claim that there is a ceasefire, a sergeant in Ukraine's 58th mechanised brigade, has been counting the days that his section gets away without taking casualties. It's not many, he said. "Usually there's two days out of every week when no one gets hit, then it kicks off again, but there hasn't been a single day since we arrived when we haven't been shot at, shelled, or mortared." Over 2500 Ukrainian troops have died, with a further 8000 plus injured. Ukraine is now actively recruiting and training a professional army to replace that which had been seriously depleted by the previous pro-Russian government. This has at least had the doubtful benefit of creating employment for some of the younger population.

However, the U.N. estimates that 3.7 million Ukrainians have been affected by the war, 3.1 million of whom still require direct humanitarian assistance. The exodus from the disputed regions and Crimea continue and while the more rural districts in Chernihiv region receive relatively few of the "internally displaced persons" the major towns, almost entirely dependent on the generosity of local citizens, are struggling to cope in any meaningful way. Our limited aid deliveries to these towns are most gratefully received and Chernihiv Aratta is approached for help almost daily.

The promises of the "new" government, elected after pro-Russian president Yanokovich was deposed by popular demand in February 2014, have failed to come to fruition. The plans to reform government and to stamp out corruption have not materialised. Following the International Monetary Fund's insistence on their politicians declaring their financial interests and holdings the population has been really shocked. The disparity disclosed, between the vast sums held in hard cash, properties, jewellery and antiques by public officials and the pitiful sums on which the ordinary people struggle to survive, has brought demonstrators back onto the streets. The current protests in Maidan (Independence Square of Kiev), about the government's failure to deal with the "shadow" economy (currently estimated at 60%!) that allows this corruption to continue, are reminiscent of the protests in 2014. Sadly, it is amazing how little of this considered newsworthy in the UK.

For the general population in the country, the economic situation remains dire with no real improvement since the monetary collapse at the end of 2014. Prices rise steadily and more than wipe out the slight increase in wages and pensions. A total lack of the social benefits that we take for granted is endangering many as they cannot afford the costs involved for proper medical treatment. Currently, deaths in Chernihiv Region outnumber births by two to one.

Against this picture of gloom, British Humanitarian Aid, thanks to its supporters, continues to bring the occasional "ray of sunshine" for individuals and organisations spread throughout a region the size of the UK's Home Counties. Over 65 tonnes of aid were collected, sorted and despatched from our Canterbury warehouse. Once, the authorities in Ukraine were happy with the distribution plans and had cleared loads BHA was actively involved in transporting the aid to the usual mixture of destinations and monitoring its deployment. Social Services, Territorial Centres (for the elderly), Hospitals, Red Cross, Charities and Schools for the Handicapped, Internats (state boarding schools for orphans and children from poor families), village councils and many individuals and families received help through the year. Very few of these recipients have adequate funding for their everyday work and finding cash for a 200/300 kilometre round trip to collect aid from Chernihiv is just not possible.

We, ourselves, had slightly fewer trips out this year so the three that materialised were of longer duration to enable both the normal distribution to be completed and further support to be given to our projects. We owe the aid team from Chernihiv Aratta a great debt of gratitude again this year. The authorities are constantly creating stress by changing regulations and seem to have little interest in making sure that their citizens receive much needed aid in the simplest possible manner. Their mid-year inspection of many charities, including the Arattas and other organisations, caused a great deal of disruption and ate into the summer breaks of many people. It is good that things are monitored but it is done in such a heavy handed manner.

A determined effort in the summer managed to get several of the rooms ready at the old people's home we have been creating in Vaganichi. It is not completely ready for use, as I called a halt on the work

so that we could make sure that plans for running the home were really secure. We also needed to make sure that all the work was done to a proper standard and the required certifications obtained. There is a tendency in Ukraine for people to do things “unofficially” by slipping a donation to local officials especially at village level. This is obviously completely unacceptable to us and we are currently negotiating for the church to run the finished home. The priest is sensible enough to want to make sure it is a viable proposition.

During the latter part of 2015 I had become aware that Nadia (Piglet mother) from Vaganichi was starting to struggle after the loss of her husband. Her care for the family, the farm, the plans for the old people’s home, the charity and particularly planning for the future of all the children were all suffering. The cheese production was making money but had escalated out of control and she and the children were exhausted. Eventually, things got so bad that she needed extended periods of hospitalisation which we helped to finance. A serious conversation with her about the future led me to discover that she had no concrete plans for anything, preferring to chase her dreams with impractical spur of the moment decisions. The paper work legally required for the new charity had not been maintained and it took a great deal of help from Aratta to sort out the problems caused. She appeared to have suffered a complete mental melt down and her insistence on doing things “the old way” was putting everything at risk. Her response, following suggestions that she needed to seek help, made it become quite clear that she is unable to work with others as she wants total control. We are continuing to monitor the situation and are trying to make sure that the children at least end up with a stable future (perhaps secure would be a better word than stable!). The Charity has been put on hold as we are not supplying further aid but will make sure that the local villages continue to receive help via other means.

During the summer we provided sports equipment for a holiday camp in Sedniv for children from several of the local orphanages, help for riverside camp near Mena for 70 parents and children from the Parents’ Voice Charity. We also helped with the successful Festival for Handicapped, held in Sribne in October, which was organised by Natasha from the “Strength in Unity” charity. The difference that these events make, and the joy it puts into the participants lives cannot be underestimated. Parents’ Voice has an exciting new project with which we are already involved. They have obtained from the Chernihiv Council an ex-utilities building which they are converting into a “day centre” for handicapped children, their parents and families. The independent charity, originally formed after an Aratta project, was to give a voice to those parents who were brave enough to defy society’s disapproval, and the lack of state support, and keep their handicapped children at home. Ukraine’s attitude towards the disabled lags far behind the more enlightened approaches in most European countries. The parents are in many cases made to feel guilt because their child is imperfect and society would seem to prefer that these children were out of sight and out of mind in an institution somewhere.

Philip G. Edmonds

2nd December 1916