



SECRETARIAT OF STATE

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From the Vatican, 18 April 2016

Your Eminence/Your Excellency,

Due to the particularly grave situation facing the Ukrainian people, the Holy Father has wished to draw the attention of the faithful to the tragic consequences of the ongoing conflict, overlooked by many. For this reason, he announced during the *Regina Coeli* of 3 April last that a special humanitarian initiative will be implemented by means of a collection to be held throughout Europe on Sunday, 24 April.

The proceeds of this collection will be joined to a substantial offering to be made by His Holiness as a sign of his own participation in this collection. These funds will be used for the benefit of those living in conflict zones and those displaced within the country. In order to ensure that this aid is effective and properly managed, the Holy See will organize specific projects for the most urgent humanitarian emergencies. These projects will be examined *in loco* by a special Commission, while the Pontifical Council *Cor Unum* will approve and evaluate the management of these funds.

In this regard, I am pleased to enclose an information sheet which may be useful in raising awareness of this humanitarian crisis.

The funds raised by this collection can be sent by the Bishops' Conferences to the Secretariat of State, Section for General Affairs, through the Apostolic Nunciatures. I would ask that these offerings be sent as soon as possible, given the extraordinary and pressing nature of this initiative.

With deep gratitude for your assistance in this matter, I remain

Yours sincerely in Christ,

Secretary of State

Presidents of the Bishops' Conferences of Europe

(enclosure)

## *Information regarding the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine*

The armed conflict in eastern Ukraine began in Spring 2014 and, notwithstanding the ceasefire of September 2015, continues still, resulting in casualties caused by a vast number of landmines and constant artillery fire. The number of dead ascertained is approximately 9,000, and many other people are displaced or imprisoned, often illegally. Instability, the continual threat of conflict, and widespread armed gangs which go unchecked are creating grave hardships for local populations, not only in areas directly affected, but in the whole of the country. Conditions are worsened by the general economic situation, gripped by high inflation which has dramatically reduced purchasing power: more than 500,000 people are in urgent need of food. There are over 1.5 million people displaced throughout the country.

In the area most affected by the war, the greatest need is for health care: over 120 health centres have been damaged or destroyed. Pregnant women and those in childbirth are particularly at risk, and the potential for the spread of AIDS and tuberculosis is high. There is a lack of anaesthesia, leading to operations often being performed without it. Where medicines are still available (many pharmacies have been closed), they have become too expensive to purchase.

Presently there are approximately 3 million people living in conditions of extreme hardship in those regions most affected by the conflict. Most of these are elderly residents who were unable to leave the combat zone.

Regarding housing, from 12,000 to 15,000 homes have been damaged, and more than 1,000 completely destroyed. The situation will be particularly dire during autumn and winter due to severe weather.

A great number of children are unable to attend school. 200,000 have found safe haven in regions of Ukraine outside of conflict areas: one out of four, therefore, is displaced. Many are affected by serious psychological traumas caused by the violence they have witnessed and themselves experienced: some have even lost the ability to read and write.

The ongoing conflict is the primary obstacle to a solution to the humanitarian crisis. In particular, limits on importing commercial goods are in force, including the importing of medicines, and it is very difficult for international aid to reach those zones most affected by the conflict.

Faced with such massive problems, communities are demonstrating an extraordinary resilience. The networks of aid groups that are most successful are those of religious organizations. Among these are Catholics who, while only 10% of the Ukrainian population and a small minority of those in conflict areas, have been fully engaged in assisting those who require help, without being able to meet the most pressing needs which are immense.

The Holy See is organizing, therefore, special forms of aid for the benefit of the whole population, regardless of religious affiliation, with a view to addressing this humanitarian crisis, especially in the most critical sectors. To assist in this effort, a mechanism for gathering funds and for selecting projects to finance is being established by means of a special Commission *in loco*, which will be charged with examining proposed projects. The Pontifical Council *Cor Unum* will be responsible for approving and evaluating the practical management of these funds, which will be subject to necessary financial accountability.