

Refugees in Ukraine are having a hard time: 'It's a disaster here'
By MISCHA VAN DIEPEN

ZARICHNE - Yuri Albeshenko is handing out food parcels in the villages around the front city of Mikolayiv. After almost six months of war, the demand for help remains, but Yuri has less to hand out. The coming winter threatens to force the elderly back to Mikolayiv. "There is not enough electricity here for everyone."

In front of a dilapidated stone building belonging to the administrative aid office of the village of Zarichne, about twenty – mostly women, one man – wait for their name to be called by an employee of the local social services.

"White rice, canned meat, macaroni," Valentina Bogdanovna shows the contents of the package. The red-haired villager says she was initially ashamed to go to the food bank on wheels.

On the other side of the river, clouds of smoke hang over the front between Kherson and Mikolayiv: the village of Zarichne is within artillery range of the Russians, but they spare the rural area. In contrast to the southernmost residential area of Mikolayiv, which is having a hard time.

"I'm not afraid of myself," says Valentina. "But for my grandson, he's at the front near Mikolayiv. And my grandnephews at Kharkov and Kiev." The women disappear with the bags along their legs in fields or around the corner of the village buildings.

In one village refugees and the elderly are also allowed on the list, in the next village only families of men at the front and fallen soldiers. Joeri races his jeep over the roads, sometimes paved, sometimes bumpy, as if a grenade could fall at any moment.

Women who report outside the list for a food package, get a blow from Yuri: he has to disappoint more and more people. They used to be able to hand out 600 packages, received from another aid organization from Odessa, now there are a hundred.

Donations

While the need for help does not diminish, he sees that the donations to his aid organization have come to a halt. Ukrainians who once collected money to help are now struggling to make ends meet, and refugees abroad are trying to continue a life there. "Everyone has long forgotten this war," he grumbles firmly.

When another bang is heard, the team looks down a dirt road that heads towards the river. A woman with medium length black hair and a dark blue dress with white dots has her shy son Mischa on her arms. She is especially concerned about his daddy, also at the front. "Here we only see the missiles flying over us."

On the way back to Mikolayiv, a light blue car drives towards Zhiguli, a car brand from the Soviet era. A Ukrainian flag flies above the roof and "To the Crimea" is glued to the windshield with yellow tape. The day before, a military airport went up in smoke there; it is unclear whether this was done by Ukrainian partisans, missiles or drones.

While the Ukrainians regain hope that even the Black Sea peninsula will be taken back from the Russians, the elderly waiting for a food package at a complex of country houses, dachas, above Mikolayiv, hope especially that Kherson will be recaptured. Then the Russians will be further from their city and they may be able to return to Mikolayiv.

"It's scary to be there. Oh God, with those bangs," says Galina Leontievna (71), with iron teeth and a wooden walking stick. "I live there on the ninth floor."

But here, in the gray brick houses with cast-iron roofs, where grapes hang over her head in Galina's bed, she cannot stay in the winter. There is no gas, and Galina sighs that she has just enough electricity to get a hot plate hot. Her neighbor thinks he can survive the winter with a large stock of firewood.

Tatyana Borodina, chairman of the residents' committee who has fled the city herself, says a total of 120 displaced persons are permanently living at a dacha, having fled Mikolayiv or villages closer to the front. They already had their own country house here or are now renting one.

At home in Mikolayiv, Yevgeny Surovtsev doesn't have a whole roof but. Now he also lives at his dacha.

"Since March there are no windows in my apartment," Tatyana laments. "I don't know how we're going to survive the winter. There are shelling there every day." But staying on the country houses is not an option, she says. "There isn't enough electricity for the winter if everyone stays here. It is a disaster there, but also here."

Yevgeny Surovtsev (69) says that his roof was damaged in a shelling. He points to the city, scratching his arms. "Look, from here you can see perfectly if my neighborhood is being shelled."

When his roof flew off, Yevgeni was already at the dacha: fled when his neighborhood was first shelled. The elderly are startled by several explosions, but reassure each other: it comes from a training ground near the dachas. "Sometimes it's hard to understand whether it's here or in Mikolayiv," Yevgeni says.

His city is still being shelled almost daily, yet Yevgeni goes there the next day. "I have to cover the roof with something for the winter."