

MAY 2022 - Overview of the work accomplished

By Road to Relief in Donbass



Since our arrival in Kramatorsk on May 6, we have carried out high-risk evacuations from areas close to the frontline. We mainly evacuated women, children, elderly, injured and vulnerable people from towns and villages such as Siversk, Severodonetsk, Soledar, Lysychansk, Pryvillya, Novodruzhes'k, Fedorivka, Bakhmut, Konstantinovka, or Toretsk. More than once have we found ourselves to be two blocks away from Russian forces; more than once have we been targeted by rockets and mortars. And yet we've come through so far without a scratch. The risks we take are balanced with the value of our work. And if we haven't had any trouble yet, it's thanks to our upstream planning and precise approach.



STRUCTURE OF OUR EVACUATIONS

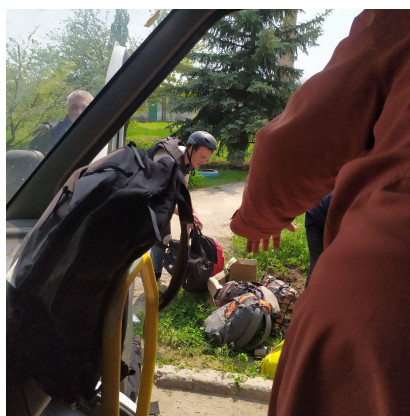
We first receive evacuation requests from local organisations and private people. We obtain addresses and pick-up locations from surrounding villages and towns, as well as the number, state and needs of these people. At this stage, we assess and determine both priority cases and the type and the number of volunteers and vehicles required.



We then receive precise and reliable intel from different entities, local and foreign. Thanks to them, we can assess the safest route, the safest time, and the most suitable approach.

Follows a debrief with the whole team. Our buses and our partners' ambulances then hit the road, reaching each address according to the order of priority. If required, we may be travelling under military and police escort. We aim to be as fast and efficient as possible on the field, given the risks involved. However, we must do so according to the physical and emotional state of the people we evacuate. Some of them can hardly move. Others do not want to abandon their homes and belongings behind them. Some, inhabited by fear, no longer know who or what to believe, and may constantly change their minds. We must therefore remain as patient and composed as possible, while trying to evacuate the refugees as quickly as possible, sometimes under shelling.

The procedure to follow on the field is quite precise. On the road, the lead vehicle remains



ahead at all times, while radios allow us to be in constant contact. The order of the convoy never changes, and the distance between each vehicle, both when driving and stopping, is calculated according to the location (urban, rural, clearance, cover, etc.) Apart from radios, we also use headlights to communicate. Relay points and secure meeting points are always set up in the event of a mishap.

Each vehicle has a driver, a paramedic and a translator. On site, only volunteers chosen upstream step out of the vehicle to meet the evacuees and help them step inside the vehicles. Drivers are always behind the wheel, unless the vehicle is directly targeted. Volunteers in charge of security monitor the vehicles and the immediate surroundings. These procedures and dispositions allow us to increase our efficiency while on the field, and reduce the risks when facing inevitable hazards and unforeseen events.



Once we have checked each accessible address and our buses are full, the convoy heads for Kramatorsk, a city lying far from the frontline. Once there, all refugees are registered by our organisation, which takes note of their choice of final destination (we always seek to accompany refugees to their preferred destination, whether in Ukraine, or in EU and overseas. The wounded and sick receive care at the hospital, which transfers the most severe cases to Dnipro - the main medical centre in eastern Ukraine. Those who do not require medical care are welcomed in a shelter with which we have a partnership: they are fed and housed there for one night, before a bus drives them to Dnipro the next day. Many wish to stay in Dnipro, where another partner shelter can accommodate them. We have visited and inspected all the shelters we partner with, to ensure the safety and comfort of the people we evacuate. Volunteers from the Dnipro shelter help them resettle in Dnipro, both with accommodation and administrative filing. In the past, we used to directly take charge of their journey and resettlement in their destination of predilection. This has caused some issues, for we couldn't deal with both arrivals in Prague or Groningen and evacuations from Siversk or Fedorovka. Due to that, we changed our approach: if we still monitor the journey and resettlement of evacuated people westward, we delegate this part to our partner NGOs, which enables us to fully focus on evacuations from Donbass to Dnipro.



OVERVIEW OF EVACUATIONS MADE IN DONBASS

⇒ **MAY 8:** We carried out our first evacuation in Donbass. On that day, Russian artillery was shelling Siversk, targeting the factory and the railway station (both located within the town center). Ukrainian units were spread around the town. We had to stop and hide the vehicles a few times, and be allowed to drive again once the shelling momentarily halted. We reached the hospital, which serves as a shelter, and evacuated 30 people, including children and elderly people. After a first stopover in Kramatorsk, they all headed to their final destinations in Dnipro, Cherkasy, Kyiv and Poltava, to reunite with their families and begin a new life.



⇒ **MAY 9:** We organized a second evacuation from Siversk, during which we took away more than 30 people, including families with children and several elderly people who were living in very difficult conditions. We waited for the shelling to pause before entering the city, which made the evacuation relatively calm and prevented any unwelcome stopover.

Klava (85) and her family - including her grandchildren Danilo (11) and Diana (9) - have been living in the basement of their neighbours' building for more than 2 months. It was completely dark, cold and rather humid.

Valentina (88) was evacuated from the hospital with her son Olexander and daughter Olena. They also lived in the basement of the hospital, waiting for an evacuation bus to swing by. After spending a night in Kramatorsk, they all headed to their final destinations in Dnipro, Poltava and Poland.



⇒ **MAY 13:** We evacuated people from a homeless shelter in Konstantinovka and a family from Toretsk. If the road involved risks (we obtain information on this road at each checkpoint), these villages were safe.

Sergey (95) lost a hand and part of his foot. He had been homeless since 2014. Vladimir (88) is almost completely paralyzed and needs constant care, which his son Yaroslav provided from their home in the suburbs of Toretsk - until their house was shelled and destroyed..



⇒ **MAY 14:** We organised our first evacuation in Severodonetsk. The city conveys a feeling of apocalypse: most of the buildings are either in smoke or ruins; not a spade found on the high street; few heads pop out of yards as we drive by; volunteers wait inside and outside the hub; some women walk around, their heads constantly shaking; others shiver at every door slam; other bystanders simply walk and cycle by, stripped of all kind of fear. And this decor rhythmed by the sight and sound of bombs and mortars.

Rymna (100 years old) lived with her family in the basement of their neighbours' building. The conditions were harsh, given the extreme humidity, low temperatures and black mould. His daughter, niece and great-grandson were devastated to have to leave their home, and shocked upon realizing the doomsday state of their town. They had not left the basement for months and were not fully aware of the reality outside.

Many of their neighbours had already left the city, having had to abandon their pets behind. Rymma chose to look after all of them, and pampered them while in the basement. She was then evacuated with 8 cats, 3 dogs, a hamster and an axolotl!

⇒ **MAY 15:** We evacuated people who lived in a former nuclear bunker in Severodonetsk.

The conditions in this bunker were appalling. Low temperatures, humidity, black mould, chemicals, lack of water and electricity, combined with the constant burning of coal make the air practically unbreathable. There are several families with children living there, as well as sick and elderly people. In three hours spent there, Jean-Tristan caught bronchitis which got him bedridden at Kramatorsk hospital for four days. Imagine the state of those people after more than thirty days trapped in this bunker: Every person has respiratory problems, ranging from pneumonia to tuberculosis.



The majority of the population has already been evacuated. Therefore those who still remain in town are there for two reasons: some want to die at home and fight for their city. Others are russophiles: they believe that, as soon as the fighting ends, the Russians will liberate the city and life in Severodonetsk will resume. They fear that, if they leave their town with us, they won't be able to come back afterwards. There are of course those who distrust both the Ukrainian government, and Westerners/foreigners. These states of mind lead to heated negotiations, where we always end up losing. If we evacuated several people, we had to settle for giving first aid and diagnoses to the people in this bunker - rather alarming diagnoses.

As we carried a woman on a stretcher from the bunker to the ambulance, she passed out for a few seconds. Fortunately, our paramedics were able to resuscitate and stabilize her. She eventually arrived safely at the hospital. She is now in Kramatorsk with her son Sasha and their dog Yessi - soon they will be released from medical care and transferred to a home.



⇒ **MAY 18:** We evacuated 12 people from the hospital in Severodonetsk, all injured.

Ivan had jumped from the third floor of a burning building, after a salvo of shelling destroyed his apartment. He was found with a broken leg and third-degree burns all over his back.

Galyna had shrapnel in her legs, stomach and chest. She underwent emergency surgery, but needed a second operation to remove shrapnel from her stomach.

Anatolyi had her collarbone and left shoulder broken.

Marina had shrapnel all over her face and right arm, as well as superficial burns on her left shoulder.

Each of these 12 people vigorously stood their ground, refusing to leave their homes until the very last minute. They all expressed their wish to come back and fight for Severodonetsk.

⇒ **MAY 20:** We evacuated people hidden under a school in Severodonetsk.

About 30 minutes after reaching the school, we found ourselves in a crossfire between Ukrainian and Russian forces. We saw Russian helicopters directly overhead and were forced to turn back to the volunteer hub. We all came out of it without a scratch.

After a brief moment of deliberation and re-planning, we decided to wait for the fighting and shelling to temporarily halt, before returning to the school and retrieving people hiding there. We were able to get 3 families to safety, while gunshots were heard from across the block. Artem (8) and Anna (13) were incredibly calm and brave throughout the trip.



⇒ **MAY 22:** Several wounded people arrived at the humanitarian centre, in Severodonetsk. They were stabilized by paramedics and we took them to the nearest hospital.

One of these injured women was asleep when her apartment was suddenly shelled. She had shrapnel all over her right arm and leg, as well as a fractured skull and severe concussion.



⇒ **MAY 23:** We set up a convoy with 3 paramedics and a local organization. We delivered humanitarian aid to Lysychansk. While in there, we were called by the coordinator of Severodonetsk that some people needed urgent care, while others were dying as we spoke. We rushed to Severodonetsk. One of them died at the hub due to a lack of adequate medical equipment on site. 10 elderly and vulnerable people were brought to Kramatorsk hospital in time, and all of them survived.



⇒ **MAY 25:** We evacuated 15 people from 5 different addresses, scattered around Severodonetsk. Laryssa and Yuri (54 and 55) have been hiding under their house for a month, with no means of communication. Their son Mikhailo, who heard of *Road to Relief* via Ukrainian TV, contacted us and begged us to check if they were still there. We drove there: their house, north of the city, was a block from Russians positions. We had to hide the vehicle under trees and reach the house

discreetly. Since his parents were hiding in the basement, Mikhailo showed us beforehand how to enter the house. He recorded a video begging them to follow us. At first, Laryssa and Yuri, isolated from the outside world for months, were reluctant to come but, as soon as we showed the video, they agreed to follow us with their cat. We stayed in contact with the son throughout the evacuation trip.

Of all of them, that evacuation in Severodonetsk was the most difficult one: the majority of the city is in ruins. Buildings are either flattened or in flames. The ground is strewn with overturned cars, piled up stones, torn poles, damaged cables, tank-made holes and unexploded shells. We sensed that the Russians had spotted us: the whistles of bombs and mortars began raining towards our direction. If their artillery couldn't target us directly, they targeted the perimeter in which we were, in the "hope" of hitting us. Above all, they were aiming for the only bridge still standing, the only access from Severodonetsk to the areas still under Ukrainian control. If they had succeeded in destroying the bridge, we would have been stuck in the city. Luckily, it was still there. We sped up between the shattered vehicles and shell holes, and made it safely to the other side.

⇒ **MAY 26:** We evacuated people from Pryvillya and Novodruzhes'k, south of the Donetsk River, which marks the frontline between Ukrainian and occupied territories. Aza's son (81 years old) asked us to evacuate his mother to a European hospice, so that she could die in peace. We suspect that he wanted her gone out of fear of having to abandon her if/when he'd have to run for his life.



All the above doesn't include the operations aborted at the last minute: this mission aborted when spotting the Russian air force overhead; that mission when driving past Ukrainian rocket launchers coming into action, calling for an immediate Russian retaliation; that other one when hearing of a FSB unit causing damage behind the lines and requiring to be 'incapacitated.' We would never attempt an evacuation if the risk is too great, and always seek to obtain reliable information from different sources.

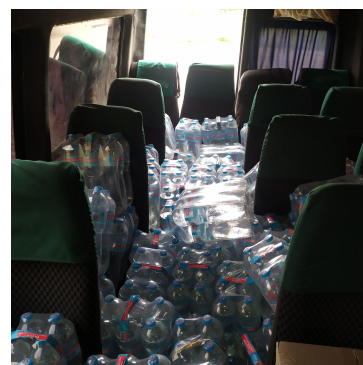
Each evacuation east of Bakhmut and Siversk proves to be trickier than the previous one: Russian and pro-Russian forces push, try to encircle the east of Donetsk oblast, ambush the roads, and target moving objects. Nothing is spared.

Nevertheless, this war is a war of position, sharing similarities with the Great War: perpetual artillery fire and little infantry progress. During daytime, danger comes from heavy shelling, while fighting mostly takes place during the night. The Russians may not retreat, but they progress slowly: for now, they do not manage to cross the Donetsk river, as deep and wide as the Amu Darya, which slows down their advancement.

After weeks of fighting and shelling, the Russians forces recently conquered the small town of Lyman, a strategic rail hub. Their artillery is now within firing range of Sloviansk, north of Kramatorsk. However, it will take weeks before Kramatorsk is within reach of Kremlin forces - especially since 50% of Severodonetsk is back under Ukrainian control as of early June. We are for now safe where we are, and will have time to see the 'smoke signals' warning us to withdraw in time.

OUTCOMES AND NEEDS

Thanks to these evacuations, we are getting to be known in Donbass: we are one of the few NGOs, and the only foreign one, to evacuate civilians from the frontline's hotspots. We have gained a certain amount of credibility with local authorities and other organisations, and have been regularly contacted by various media. We were covered and interviewed by journalists from Rai, Sky, Radio France, Radio Canada, LCI, CNN, as well as New Zealand, Swiss and Spanish reporters. We have also been contacted by large-scale humanitarian organisations, such as Médecins Sans Frontières, who asked us to deliver medical equipment to Lysychansk.



However, our working conditions are quite difficult, and some issues have to be solved.

The main problem is the lack of network and internet in the areas close to the frontline. Due to this, it is very difficult for us to contact the evacuation requesters and the coordinators on

site in the event of an unforeseen event. We sometimes found ourselves looking for the coordinators through the villages, or going to addresses that turned out to be empty.

We have two solutions to overcome these issues:

→ The first solution is to set up a STARLINK satellite internet network equipment on our vehicles. This would allow us to have a constant network and be reachable at all times. This costs \$110/month, plus \$599 to set up.

→ The second solution is to have our own coordinators in the villages, rather than independent coordinators with whom we work in partnership. These coordinators do an excellent job, but their position depends on many other factors unrelated to our work. Having our own coordinators on site would allow us to obtain all information upstream, and obtain clear reconnaissance on site prior to our arrival. We are therefore looking for (and vetting) reliable Russian-speaking volunteers who are ready to settle in the villages of Donetsk Oblast, in order to facilitate the organization and efficiency of our evacuations.

The other issue we face is just as critical: vehicles. The Donbass roads are difficult to pass. The best roads are targeted or occupied by Russian forces, which push us down the bumpy dirt roads damaged by the constant passage of tanks and military trucks. We would love to be able to use 4x4s, but we need minibuses to evacuate as many refugees as possible. Most of our vehicles have suffered (it is quite tricky to drive quietly on a hole-filled road when mortars are pouring). Besides, the questionable quality of gasoline and diesel available, combined with the current lack of resources of local garages, have provoked an avalanche of automotive glitches: one of our buses had its last breath in Severodonetsk; another nearly broke down at Siversk; a third one is stuck at the garage.



We hired a former mechanic as a volunteer. This volunteer is currently in Dnipro to purchase new buses: he will ensure that the quality of these vehicles meets our needs by doing two complete check-ups at two different garages. The issue is financial: in order to obtain minibuses able to ride these roads, we must spend at least 8000 or 9000\$ per vehicle. This would guarantee the acquisition of roadworthy vehicles to drive the evacuees from the frontline towards safety.

As you may imagine, these issues tend to affect us. Since we are the only foreign NGO on the frontline, we feel that many people (evacuees, coordinators, local organizations, administrations, etc.) count on *Road to Relief*. This honours us, but accentuates both our responsibilities and the pressure on our shoulders. Crossing dangerous areas on a daily basis is quite gruelling, and we are aware every day that things could go wrong. One of the Severodonetsk coordinators was wounded two hours after our departure from the city, and we personally knew the BFM TV journalist killed in Lysychansk. It is therefore difficult for us to deal with, on top of all the above, unforeseen vehicles issues, which slow down our work, prevent us from evacuating people who are in immediate need, and could perhaps affect our legitimacy as an NGO.



So far, we are happy with the work accomplished. We managed to evacuate several hundred people, many of which would still be there (or would no longer be there) if we had not gone to look for them. Still, we are slowed down by the conditions in which we work. A war zone imposes many restrictions, and we have to deal with inevitable shortages of resources on a daily basis, combined with trust issues inherent to bellicism.

Our practical difficulties are balanced by a good atmosphere within our team. Despite the constant pressure, we eventually manage to land on our feet and remain cool-headed. This allows us to maintain a warm atmosphere between the three of us (Emma, Henri and Jean-Tristan), and the trust reigning in our trio helps us face the daily struggle of a war zone. This enables the NGO to move forward and grow with each evacuation. In areas where it is difficult to trust others (Russian intelligence services are known for their efficiency), we have still managed to find reliable, efficient and resourceful volunteers. Our team is growing well and expanding, filled with optimism.

