

PROTECTION CONCERNS OF PEOPLE LIVING ALONG THE CONTACT LINE



© M. Friedman/ A husband and wife return after withdrawing their pensions

BACKGROUND

- The area along the contact line separating government-controlled areas (GCA) and non-government-controlled areas (NGCA) of eastern Ukraine **remains a priority for humanitarian operations**. The civilian population faces constant threat of death or injury from shelling, shooting, military presence, mines and explosive remnants of war (ERWs), with at least 3,347 civilians killed and over 7,000 injured since the beginning of the conflict.¹
- Many people have had their homes damaged or destroyed, with access to utilities and public services, including health care, social protection and education limited or not available. Damaged roads and lack of public transport leaves many residents isolated, and employment and livelihood opportunities are few, further marginalising people living in this area.
- In 2019 a **protection assessment was conducted in 53 isolated settlements along the contact line in GCA**.² It highlighted the specific needs of people with disabilities, as well as older people, who account for at least 41 per cent of the population in these settlements.



KEY PROTECTION CONCERNS

- **Restricted freedom of movement.** In 2019, there were on average 1.2 million crossings of the contact line every month.³ Despite improvements, **checkpoints still lack adequate health, sanitation and shelter facilities**, with long queues forcing people to wait for hours, and sometimes - even overnight. While queuing, people are exposed to intense weather conditions in summer and winter, putting their health at risk. This is particularly challenging for the elderly, those with disabilities, children and pregnant women. Between January and December 2019, 39 people died while crossing the contact line as a result of health complications and mine/ERW incidents.

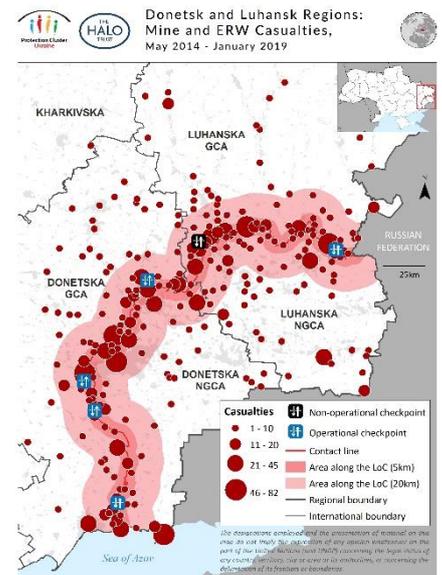
Another concern relates to **'internal checkpoints' in GCA**. Residents in settlements located along the contact line are often further isolated by these crossing points set up between the contact line and bigger towns within GCA. These crossing points curtail residents' freedom of movement as well as access to the settlements for ambulances, firefighters, law enforcement authorities, service providers and humanitarian actors. Internally displaced people are unable to access their property or return to their homes. Access to houses in some isolated settlements is granted only to people permanently residing in the settlements, as the lists of residents are being regularly updated by the military. This does not allow IDPs to check their property and assess damages, which is necessary to apply for compensation.

¹ Estimates according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

² REACH, [Protection Assessment of Isolated Settlements in GCA along the contact line](#), February 2019; in partnership with the Protection Cluster and UNHCR, and supported by NGO Proliska, Save the Children, NGO Istok, HelpAge International and International Medical Corps.

³ UNHCR [Online Checkpoints Crossings Dashboard](#) based on data from State Border Guard Service of Ukraine.

- **Access to transport.** While restricted freedom of movement contributes to the isolation of people living along the contact line, such isolation is further compounded by lack of transportation. Currently, 20 settlements in Luhansk and 48 settlements in Donetsk oblasts located along the line of contact in GCA remain without passenger transport services.⁴ **Large distances to other settlements and the lack of public transportation restrict residents' mobility**, especially of older people and people with disabilities. When available, public transport is often unsuitable for people with disabilities. **Travelling to larger settlements to access services is expensive and impacts their financial situation.** Roads in bad conditions, not cleared from snow or ice, damaged by military equipment or unmarked are common in isolated settlements, where only 3 out of the 53 settlements assessed by REACH had access to roads in good condition.
- **Threats to life, security and safety.** People living along the contact line face risks of death or injury from shooting and shelling, with fighting being sporadic and unpredictable. Residents in isolated settlements report experiencing particularly **high levels of fear**, with 74 per cent of households reporting feeling a periodic or constant threat to their life during daytime hours and a greater proportion (80 per cent) during the night.⁵ The **most reported security concerns are shootings (67 per cent), shelling, (64 per cent)**, military presence (25 per cent) and landmines (24 per cent), including fear of children walking to and from schools and playing outside. Another growing fear reported by 20 per cent of residents in isolated settlements is the **increasing number of wild and stray animals**, caused by a ban on hunting and lack of control of stray animals, which pose a threat to life and health.⁶
- **Mine and ERW contamination.** About 7,000 sq. km. in Donetsk and Luhansk GCA regions are contaminated with mines and ERW.⁷ From the start of the conflict until end of December 2019, 1,077 civilians have been killed or injured by mines/ERW according to OHCHR. **About a third of people living along the contact line are not aware of mine/ERW risks.** For mine/ERW victims, continuous medical care is hampered due to limited transport connections between isolated villages and specialised healthcare facilities. Mine/ERW contamination also prevents people living in rural areas along the contact line from engaging in agricultural activities, further reducing livelihood opportunities.
- **Gender-Based Violence.** The high concentration of military, coupled with a proliferation of weapons, weak law enforcement, and impunity for perpetrators, has increased the risk of gender-based violence (GBV) for women, adolescent girls and children living along the contact line. People living in isolated settlements report an **increase in domestic violence against women**, reportedly due to the increase in unemployment, pressure from military presence and an increase in alcohol abuse. Lack of livelihoods in isolated settlements may also lead some women and girls to resort to transactional sex.⁸
- **Access to justice.** Access to justice is limited due to the absence of courts in certain settlements (Stanytsia Luhanska, Avdiivka) and a serious shortage of judges (Novohorodivka, Popasna). The lack of judges means that there is a backlog of critical and time-sensitive cases, such as those related to child protection, which can wait years to be adjudicated.
- **Administrative challenges.** In five settlements along the contact line there are **no village councils and the civil military administrations have not been established yet** (Vodiane, Severne, Pisky, Opytne in Donetska oblast and Novooleksandrivka in Luhanska oblast). As a result, people cannot obtain basic assistance required to access administrative and social services.
A number of conflict-affected settlements are not included in the list of the Cabinet of Ministers Resolution No. 1085 of 7 November 2014, and as a result people displaced from these settlements cannot obtain targeted assistance for IDPs (Bila Hora, Loskutivka, Novozvanivka, Vrubivka in Luhansk oblast and Novotroitske in Donetsk oblast).
- **Access to social services for older people.** The conflict has led to changes in the structure of the population, with many people of working age leaving and older people and people with disabilities staying behind. Those in need of daily care are **not admitted to residential care homes for state support, unless they can prove that they do not have relatives** who are required to support them by law. They are not eligible for free assistance from the local social services centres and have to pay to receive social services. At the same time, their relatives may be missing, residing in NGCA or have been displaced outside Ukraine and it is not possible to locate them or oblige them to support their relatives. People are being assisted by religious organizations or private care homes, supported by volunteers through donations. There are no government programs to support private residential care homes for older people or people with disabilities.



⁴ According to monitoring by NGO Proliska, 2019.

⁵ REACH, Protection Assessment of Isolated Settlements in GCA along the contact line, February 2019.

⁶ *Idem*.

⁷ According to estimations by national authorities.

⁸ REACH, Protection Assessment of Isolated Settlements in GCA along the contact line, February 2019.

- **Access to services, in particular healthcare.** The residents of isolated settlements along the contact line continue to experience difficulties accessing services and support, mainly due to **lack of service providers and curtailed mobility** resulting from the distance settlements where services are available, the cost of travel, the lack of transport, security concerns and sometimes the necessity to cross a checkpoint. The main services to which people lack access are healthcare, education, banking and public services. Another concern associated with isolation is the **lack of information on available services**, which affects the most isolated and vulnerable residents of these settlements, including bedridden older people and those living alone, people with disabilities, single-headed households with children and GBV survivors. **Lack of access to healthcare services is a particular concern** given that older people and people with chronic illnesses form a large part of the population. Many healthcare facilities are understaffed and lack equipment, and the necessary medicines are often not available.⁹ For some villages, the nearest hospitals are many kilometres away or on the other side of the contact line. This issue is further compounded by the fact that ambulances often refuse to go to settlements near the contact line or come with significant delay.

There is limited access to **mental healthcare assistance** in the settlements near the contact line. Moreover, people with mental conditions face difficulties with access to general healthcare; partners report cases when persons with mental healthcare needs are not being admitted to medical institutions to access physical care.

- **Psychological distress.** People living along the contact line suffer from psychological stress including anxiety, fear, and depression as a result of ongoing hostilities and fear of shelling, shooting, mine contamination and military presence as well as from lack of livelihoods and poor living conditions. Officially, more than 10,000 children experienced psychological violence.¹⁰ Like other services, **psychological support services are not available in isolated settlements**, except when provided by mobile-teams. As a result of psychological distress, people, including children, often resort to **negative coping strategies**, including alcohol and drug consumption.
- **Housing, land and property rights.** Almost half of households living in isolated settlements in GCA report having some form of damages to their home as a result of the conflict. In July 2019, a **new administrative procedure was introduced for the payment of financial compensation** for people whose housing has been destroyed as a result of the conflict.¹¹ While this mechanism is not operational yet, the Government is currently developing the necessary templates and regulations, with the support of the humanitarian community. In addition, according to the 2020 State budget, 40 million UAH has already been allocated to cover compensations for destroyed housing. Meanwhile, **most affected households have had to pay for repairs themselves or rely on support from humanitarian actors.** Some affected households in Donetsk oblast are having their houses repaired thanks to the financial support of the oblast authorities. Military use of civilian houses and inability to use land inaccessible due to hostilities or contaminated by mines and UXO is also an issue for people living along the contact line. Households often have to pay utility bills for property used by the military in addition to those of their current place of residence, as well as land taxes, even if they cannot use the land. **Debts for utilities and unpaid taxes accumulate** and can have a devastating effect on the already depleted financial resources of people living along the contact line.

- **Access to utilities and goods.** Continuous hostilities along the contact line result in regular outages in electricity and water supply and 35 per cent of households in isolated settlements reported experiencing water shortages.¹² As a majority of households are not connected to a central heating system, they use coal and wood during winter periods. However, **suppliers often refuse to deliver coal to isolated villages or only at higher prices.** At the same time, collecting firewood poses security risks connected with mine-contaminated areas. Often, prices for basic goods such as food, hygiene materials and medicine are higher in isolated settlements, due to scarcity and increased transport costs.



© People in Need / PIN delivers coal to Opytne village, which is cut off from gas heating

- **Electricity costs** for IDPs residing in cottage cooperatives are more than double the standard rate for the population.¹³ These cooperatives are not included in the list of accommodation used by IDPs defined in the law of Ukraine "On ensuring the rights and freedoms of internally displaced persons", which makes it impossible for IDPs to pay for electricity at standard rate and leads to unjustified increase of costs.
- There are settlements, which used to have **gas heating**, but since the beginning of hostilities, have been cut off from the central gas supply. People therefore have to use electricity, coal or wood to heat their homes, but are not eligible for subsidies for these forms of heating, since their settlements are officially considered to have access to gas heating. Given the high cost of utilities in Ukraine, this places a large financial burden on families.

⁹ Joint Protection and Health Clusters note, 'Exploring Access to Healthcare Services in Eastern Ukraine', August 2019.

¹⁰ According to the statistics of the Ministry of Social Policy for 2018.

¹¹ Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine [Resolution No. 623 of 10 July 2019](#) amending Resolution No. 947 of 18 December 2013.

¹² REACH, Protection Assessment of Isolated Settlements in GCA along the contact line, February 2019.

¹³ According to monitoring by NGO Proliska, 2019.

KEY MESSAGES

- 1. IMPROVE PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS** – Parties to the conflict should refrain from shelling checkpoints and settlements located along the contact line and abstain from placing military bases and equipment close to residential areas and schools. Parties should ensure respectful and safe conduct towards civilians.
- 2. ENHANCE FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT** – Parties to the conflict should facilitate freedom of movement by improving checkpoint conditions and easing crossings at ‘internal checkpoints’. Priority treatment should be given to people with specific needs and mobility issues, including older people, people with disabilities, pregnant women and families with children.
- 3. ENSURE EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE** – Emergency services, such as ambulances and firefighters, as well as humanitarian actors, should be granted access to settlements immediately to guarantee timely and effective life-saving assistance and support to residents of isolated villages.
- 4. DECREASE MINE AND ERW RELATED RISKS** – People living along the contact line and crossing the contact line should be properly informed about mine and ERW risks. Mine and ERW areas should be clearly marked and protected against accidental trespassing, especially near checkpoints and residential areas, and demining activities should be boosted in areas along the contact line to increase the safety of people living in these areas.
- 5. ALLEVIATE ISOLATION OF SETTLEMENTS ALONG THE CONTACT LINE** – Public transportation services between isolated settlements and towns where public services, particularly healthcare services, psychosocial support services and other type of assistance, should be improved. Humanitarian actors should continue providing on-the-spot assistance through mobile teams. Public service providers should progressively restore their presence in settlements close to the contact line.
- 6. ENSURE PRESENCE OF AND ACCESS TO THE AUTHORITIES** – Administrative, judicial and law enforcement authorities should be available and accessible for people living along the contact line. Local government structures must be established for the five villages that have no village councils and where civil military administrations have not been established. In order to ensure access to justice, courts must be established in Stanytsia Luhanska and Avdiivka and personnel of courts in communities along the contact line should be expanded. Law enforcement authorities must also guarantee their presence in these settlements.
- 7. ENSURE ACCESS TO NECESSARY SERVICES AND ASSISTANCE** – Residents in isolated settlements should have access to basic services including healthcare as well as to the necessary medical, psychological and legal assistance. Mobile banking services should be developed to ensure access to financial services. People with specific needs living in isolated settlements such as isolated older people, people with chronic illnesses, people with disabilities, mine and ERW survivors and GBV survivors should have access to specific services such as shelters, safe spaces, rehabilitation and home-based care when required. Omissions to the list of communities affected by the conflict should be corrected so that people from these communities can obtain targeted assistance, as IDPs do.
- 8. SUPPORT OLDER PEOPLE AND PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES** – Practical solutions should be developed for social service providers to be able to deliver relevant social assistance to older people and people with disabilities who have close relatives who cannot provide care for them. This can be done either through the procurement of social services from private residential care homes and hospices for people requiring external assistance or providing assistance through local social services centers for people needing home-based care.
- 9. GUARANTEE HLP RIGHTS** – Legal redress and compensation need to be made available for those whose property has been damaged, destroyed, or used for military purposes. The newly introduced administrative mechanism for compensation must be fully operational, accessible to all affected individuals and provide fair and appropriate compensation. Individuals whose property is located in areas outside the Ukrainian authorities’ control should be able, at a minimum, to document their claims with the Ukrainian Government.
- 10. REDUCE PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS** – Awareness about psychological distress, including anxiety and depression, should be raised amongst residents of isolated settlements to reduce stigma and prejudices and increase screening of mental disorders as well as self-identification. People suffering from psychological distress should receive comprehensive support to help them improve their condition and prevent them from adopting negative coping strategies.
- 11. ENSURE ACCESS TO UTILITIES** – The cost of electricity should be made affordable for IDPs living in cottage communities. Heating subsidies for hard fuel should be expanded to persons living in communities where the conflict has disrupted the gas connection.