![Australian Red Cross logo]

Submission to the Inquiry into Australian support for Ukraine

10 May 2024

![Australian Red Cross logo]

About us

Established in 1914 and by [Royal Charter](#) in 1941, Australian Red Cross is auxiliary to the public authorities in the humanitarian field. We have a unique humanitarian mandate to respond to disasters and emergencies. This partnership means governments can benefit from a trusted, credible, independent and non-political partner with local to global networks, who will work to implement humanitarian goals in a way that maintains the trust of government and Australian society.

Australian Red Cross is one of 191 Red Cross or Red Crescent National Societies that, together with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), make up the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement) – the world's largest and most experienced humanitarian network.

The Movement is guided at all times and in all places by seven [Fundamental Principles](#): Humanity, Impartiality, Neutrality, Independence, Voluntary Service, Unity and Universality. These principles sum up our ethics and the way we work, and they are at the core of our mission to prevent and alleviate suffering.

We remain neutral, and don't take sides, including in politics; enabling us to maintain the trust of all and to provide assistance in locations others are unable to go. Volunteering is in our DNA, and thousands of volunteers and members support us every day, helping solve social issues in their own communities. All our work is inspired and framed by the principle of Humanity: we seek always to act where there is humanitarian need.

Core areas of expertise for Australian Red Cross include Emergency Services, Migration, International Humanitarian Law (IHL), International Programs, Community Activities and Programs.

Highlights from our [2022-23 Annual Report](#):

18,000+
members and volunteers acting for humanity

324,000+
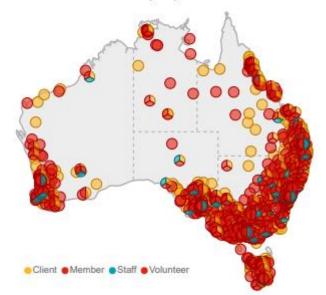Australians supported during 33 emergency activations

216,000+
social support hours delivered

19,700+
people from 125 countries supported through migration programs

Location of Red Cross people and clients

Client ● Member ● Staff ● Volunteer

Purpose

The Australian Government is seeking feedback on [Australian support for Ukraine](), as referred by the Senate to the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee for inquiry.

Australian Red Cross welcomes the opportunity to provide our input to this inquiry. We have focused our response on areas where we have extensive expertise and that align with the unique humanitarian mandate of Australian Red Cross.

Summary of recommendations

Australian Red Cross recommends that the Australian Government:

Recommendation 1

Focus all diplomatic efforts on achieving compliance with international humanitarian law by all parties to the conflict; including related issues on the transfer of arms and ending the crisis and associated human suffering.

Recommendation 2

Sustain levels of humanitarian funding commensurate with severe and ongoing needs, develop a long-term strategy for supporting Ukraine, and use its influence with like-minded donors to invest in and strengthen locally led humanitarian action.

Recommendation 3

Develop a consistent and coordinated domestic approach to respond to the humanitarian needs of people impacted by crises and disasters overseas, including when crises are protracted. This could include emergency evacuations, safe and regular pathways to Australia, and support for migrants in Australia.

1. Responding to humanitarian challenges in Ukraine

1.1 The response to the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine – in terms of people supported and the number of countries involved – is one of the largest operations in the history of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement).

1.2 Since the escalation of conflict in February 2022, 27.2 million Ukrainians have been impacted, with a quarter of the population (over 10 million people) displaced from their homes. Millions more have been affected in hardest hit areas inside Ukraine where essential services are difficult to access. There are shortages of food, water and medicine, and people are trapped under regular bombardment.

1.3 Continuing to meet the immediate humanitarian needs of Ukrainians inside and outside the country requires significant investment.

1.4 Australian Red Cross acknowledges the Australian Government's support to Ukraine including the humanitarian contribution of $75 million, of which $2 million was provided to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) Emergency Appeal and $8 million to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Appeal.

1.5 As the conflict in Ukraine enters its eleventh year since the annexation of Crimea and third year since the escalation of the Russia-Ukraine armed conflict, the humanitarian crisis is increasing in its complexity. Devastation continues to affect every aspect of people's lives.

1.6 Since the escalation, Movement teams in Ukraine and more than 45 countries (including Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Moldova, Estonia, Romania, Lithuania, Latvia, Bulgaria, Georgia, Croatia, Montenegro, Greece, Türkiye and Russia) have provided essential humanitarian assistance to an estimated 18 million people suffering from the consequences of this conflict.

    1.6.1 This includes provision of shelter and accommodation, health care, access to clean water and sanitation, cash payments, migration and displacement support, and reuniting families.

1.7 Australian Red Cross has been supporting the Movement's response through funding, human resources, and domestic programs and advocacy.

    1.7.1 The Australian public – including the community, and corporate and philanthropic partners – has generously donated more than $17.6 million to our Ukraine crisis appeal since it was launched in February 2022, enabling provision of emergency relief including cash assistance and longer-term humanitarian support in Ukraine and neighbouring countries, including to people who are displaced.

    1.7.2 Australian Red Cross has deployed 19 specialist aid workers since the escalation of the armed conflict with expertise in key areas such as protection (including Restoring Family Links), health, water and sanitation, logistics and communications to assist local teams (four to ICRC and 15 to IFRC).

1.8 Due to the prevalence of protection issues in Ukraine and neighbouring countries, with increased risks of trafficking and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence and exploitation, Australian Red Cross has prioritised supporting protection, gender and inclusion (PGI) work in IFRC's regional response. This has included dedicated funding and technical support to ensure that protection work is supported as a key pillar in the Movement response.

> **Case study: Cash for Protection Program**
>
> Australian Red Cross supports the Cash for Protection Program in Hungary which provides unconditional cash assistance to people displaced from Ukraine, prioritising groups facing marginalisation including women, children, older persons, persons with disabilities and Roma communities.
>
> One transfer of 78 euros enables recipients to address their immediate needs, such as healthcare, which they would otherwise struggle to afford under temporary protection. This method of assistance provides a dignified way to support people in addressing their own needs.
>
> In 2023, the program supported **3053 people** – the high implementation rate and fast collection showed the level of need for this type of humanitarian support.
>
> This case study highlights some of the critical humanitarian services enabled by Australian humanitarian funding.

2. Addressing human suffering

2.1 The Australian Government has articulated a goal for a peaceful, sustainable and prosperous world in which every person is able to enjoy their human rights. Australian Red Cross calls on the Australian Government to continue to focus diplomatic efforts towards this aim, and emphasise the complementary role of IHL in seeking to reduce human suffering in contexts like Ukraine.

International Humanitarian Law

2.2 Australian Red Cross acknowledges that the Australian Government has called on both parties to the conflict to respect and ensure compliance with their obligations under international humanitarian law (IHL)[1] and has emphasised the need for accountability over violations of IHL.

2.3 We urge the Australian Government to continue to do so, including, where necessary, the investigation of allegations and prosecution of violations of IHL.

    2.3.1 Compliance with IHL provides meaningful protection to people affected by armed conflict, while also minimising the human, social, economic, and environmental cost of armed conflict.

    2.3.2 Promoting adherence to IHL aligns with Australia's own obligations under international and domestic law, and with national interest in championing the rules-based global order (as per the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper) as a cornerstone of global stability, peace and prosperity.

2.4 The Movement has a mandated role in promoting and strengthening IHL and humanitarian principles. The Movement places emphasis on IHL rules protecting civilians, civilian objects and specially protected objects, particularly as the conflict plays out in populated areas. Treatment of prisoners of war and other persons deprived of their liberty, protection of health and humanitarian workers, hospitals and other facilities, access to essential services and ensuring humanitarian access remain priorities for the Movement.

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[1] IHL is a set of laws that seeks to limit suffering in times of armed conflict - by protecting those not or no longer in the fight and or by limiting the weapons and tactics used. The universally ratified Geneva Conventions of 1949 - and their Additional Protocols - form the backbone of IHL.

2.5 Australian Red Cross continues to emphasise the ongoing and contemporary relevance of the rules and principles of IHL, including those found in the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols of 1977. In our role as auxiliary to the public authorities in the humanitarian field, we actively work with the Australian Government in ensuring respect for IHL, including through the mechanism of the National IHL Committee and other measures to implement IHL in domestic law.

    2.5.1 This has involved general IHL dissemination, including leveraging Australian Red Cross social media platforms, including with messaging devoted to IHL, to promote compliance with IHL and to foster a general culture of understanding of IHL highlighting issues arising out of the conflict, such as family separation and civilian evacuations.

2.6 Compliance with prohibitions and restrictions on certain weapons also helps give effect to IHL and humanitarian principles. Australia is party to the 2013 Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), which aims to establish the highest possible common international standards for regulating the international trade in conventional arms, including in the form of military support. In particular, arms or items must not be exported if there is a clear risk that they could be used to commit or facilitate a serious violation of IHL or international human rights law.

2.7 We acknowledge the Australian Government's concern about the flow of arms to parties to this conflict resulting in violations of IHL. We therefore encourage the Australian Government, in their provision of military support to Ukraine, to comply with all relevant obligations pertaining to the international transfer of arms and items, including under the ATT.

Trust in humanitarian action

2.8 Australian Red Cross has an obligation to approach dialogue on this conflict in a neutral, impartial and independent manner. Yet, the complexity of the regional crisis has impacted trust in humanitarian action and highlighted a limited awareness of the Movement's role and mandate. Waning trust risks undermining the Movement's efforts to provide support in the region – it can generate reluctance among donors and partners, a rise in misinformation, and the inability to secure access or engage in negotiations, which ultimately erodes the ability to help.

2.9 It is a challenging time to be a neutral and impartial humanitarian organisation. However, we hold fast to this mandate and its ability to protect people, enable humanitarian access, and build trust of all parties to conflict and among communities. We recognise the educational opportunity this presents – to clarify the meaning of principled humanitarian action and emphasise the unique role that the Movement plays in armed conflict. This includes, as per our auxiliary role, the provision by Australian Red Cross of confidential advice to the Australian Government.

2.10 We commend the Australian Government on its continued commitment to, and recognition of, the Movement mandate, and call on all actors of influence in government to help us protect principled humanitarian action and contribute to building a universal and unifying culture of compliance with IHL, including calling for the repression of grave breaches of IHL and suppression of all other violations of the laws and customs of war.

Recommendation 1

The Australian Government focus all diplomatic efforts on achieving compliance with international humanitarian law by all parties to the conflict; including related issues on the transfer of arms and ending the crisis and associated human suffering.

3. Meeting the ongoing humanitarian needs

3.1 Australian Red Cross is concerned about the widening gap between humanitarian needs and available funds and resources for Ukraine. The sudden intensification and spread of hostilities in early 2022 captured the world's – and Australia's – attention, manifesting in generous public and political support for the country. After more than two years of intense conflict and competing humanitarian and domestic priorities, funds and solidarity are waning.

Case study: Appeals

Only a fifth (20%) of the humanitarian community's appeal for US $3.1 billion to assist 8.5 million people facing the most severe needs along the frontline areas has been funded to date.

Similarly, IFRC's emergency appeal for CHF800 million to support the needs of 22.6 million impacted people in Ukraine and across the region is only 61.8% funded, leaving a significant gap.

Australian Red Cross Ukraine Crisis Appeal, one of our largest since the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, raised 85% ($15 million) in its first six months in 2022 but only $2.6 million in the last 18 months (for a total of $17.6 million).

Humanitarian funding by Australia has followed a similar trajectory with the vast majority ($65 million) provided in 2022 and a relatively small amount ($10 million) in 2023. Australia's military assistance, on the other hand, has continued to be made available in significant amounts.

Humanitarian funds are typically required to be spent within 12 months of being received, as was the case for the funding provided to Australian Red Cross. This presents another challenge in supporting impacted people in Ukraine and surrounding countries whose needs remain inextricably linked to the ongoing dynamic and protracted nature of the conflict.

3.2 Despite the protracted nature of the crisis, the conflict is volatile and dynamic. The Movement welcomes donor interests in recovery and reconstruction, but this should not compete with humanitarian funding while the conflict remains active. Donors are also pushing to concentrate humanitarian funding in areas closest to the fighting, which leaves significant gaps in addressing the severe humanitarian needs of the broader impacted population inside and outside of the country.

   3.2.1 For example, a recent IMPACT survey shows that 49% of returnees have urgent unmet needs including non-food items, medical, employment and food, and 87% of the population have no access to humanitarian assistance. Donors must improve their coordination efforts so that long term recovery and development plans complement investment in humanitarian response to meet severe needs of impacted communities now.

3.3 Australia's long-term strategy in Ukraine must focus on sustainable humanitarian action. Investing in locally led humanitarian response to ensure impacted populations continue to be supported now and into the future aligns with government policy that emphasises the importance of localisation in international aid. This approach recognises the crucial role that Ukrainian organisations and their volunteers have played in responding to the humanitarian crisis from the outset. By investing in and empowering these local actors, Australia can promote sustainability, build local capacity, and ensure that aid efforts are more responsive to the needs and priorities of affected communities. This strategy also aligns with global commitments such as the Grand Bargain.

3.3.1   For example, the Ukrainian Red Cross Society (URCS) is leading the response in some of the most dangerous areas of the country, where the needs are highest. Their Rapid Response teams are stationed all around the country and are active in the first hours after an attack, rescuing people and providing first aid. URCS teams also continue to support communities experiencing crises within a crisis, such as their swift response to the humanitarian disaster caused by the breach of the Nova Kakhovka dam in June 2023.

3.3.2   Additionally, URCS is leading the coordination of local civil society responding to the conflict through the Ukrainian Alliance of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), which they helped establish in 2023. Despite their effectiveness, the sustainability of URCS operations is under threat as the flow of international funding for Ukraine through the Movement declines.

3.4   Australian Red Cross supports URCS' vision for localisation (URCS One Plan 2023-2025), which seeks to enhance the voice and leadership of Ukrainian organisations in humanitarian response through better partnership practices, resource allocation, coordination and capacity building. Ultimately, this requires all international actors to outline their own commitments to shift power to local leadership, including equal, meaningful and safe participation and inclusion of a diverse range of Ukrainian voices in decision-making.

3.4.1   As outlined in the Disasters Emergency Committee report into the options for supporting and strengthening humanitarian action in Ukraine, in 2021, 40% of OCHA's Ukraine Humanitarian Fund was going directly to local NGOs. Since February 2022, this has decreased to 19% despite the significant increase in funding, highlighting the challenges local organisations face to their roles and sustainability when there is a massive influx of donor interest and funds for a crisis.

Recommendation 2

The Australian Government sustain levels of humanitarian funding commensurate with severe and ongoing needs, develop a long-term strategy for supporting Ukraine, and use its influence with like-minded donors to invest in and strengthen locally led humanitarian action.

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4.   Newly arrived people from Ukraine in Australia

4.1   Domestically, Australian Red Cross Migration Support teams have been providing social, financial, and other assistance for people affected by the conflict.

4.1.1   This includes 72 inquiries to the Restoring Family Links program (provided in our role as auxiliary to public authorities in the humanitarian field) in circumstances of family separation or missing family members. Through this program, 16 new cases were opened concerning a total of 44 people being sought as a result of the conflict in Ukraine by their relatives in Australia.

4.1.2   In addition, as one of the providers of the Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP), our teams have supported hundreds of people arriving in Australia from Ukraine.

4.2   Some elements of the Australian Government's domestic response had a positive impact on people's wellbeing, as evidenced by the case study below.

> **Case study: Australian Government response**
>
> The Australian Government rapidly activated an established pathway for people to arrive through regular, safe and orderly migration channels to Australia: Visitor Visa (Subclass 600) / Humanitarian Stay (Temporary) Visa (Subclass 449) / Temporary (Humanitarian Concern) visa (Subclass 786).
>
> Safety net and settlement support were available to people who arrived before 31 July 2022 through the HSP, linking people to essential services to meet their basic needs. This included access to Medicare, Centrelink payments, employment support services and paid interpreter services.
>
> The Department of Home Affairs maintained an active role in responding to queries from community and service providers throughout the response.
>
> Existing Ukrainian community and diaspora groups were supported by the government and community sector to provide coordinated support to new arrivals. The HSP providers worked closely with these groups to link people to services and share technical and specialist knowledge about settlement and services available.
>
> Media messaging from government was positive, contributing to building a welcoming environment for people arriving from Ukraine. It was important that messaging focused on people, civilians, needs and supports for those communities.

> When conducting an internal consultation to prepare this response, one frontline staff member said:
>
> *"The [Australian Government's] Ukraine Response is one of the best examples of how we [Australia] should respond to any crises."*
>
> And in response to a question of "what would you suggest for next time" they said:
>
> *"Replicate the best practices to other responses."*

4.3 There were, however, operational challenges in the response and lessons can be learned for future crises, particularly regarding system design and readiness:

    4.3.1   The environment and eligibility for different visas and support changed over time; the Department of Home Affairs announced a 449/786 visa eligibility cut-off date (31 July 2022) after which people could arrive on a visitor visa and seek alternate visa pathways once in Australia. This meant that people could still travel to Australia through regular, safe, and orderly migration routes, however, they were not eligible for HSP support on arrival or other benefits of being on a Humanitarian Stay (Temporary) visa (Subclass 449) or Temporary (Humanitarian Concern) visa (Subclass 786).

    4.3.2   The response provisions were initially different to the previous evacuation of people from Afghanistan, which can be problematic, as inconsistent approaches may lead to gaps in coverage and a lack of standardised support for those in need. Australian Red Cross worked closely with the Department of Home Affairs and Services Australia to develop responses and highlight humanitarian needs specific to this cohort as they emerged.

4.3.3 Eligibility changes and the lack of a consistent response model made it difficult to communicate with people arriving, as the response was fluid and changing. This required coordination across a number of government departments with Services Australia playing an important role. This led to people and communities often reaching out to Australian Red Cross for clarity on what support they could access. Australian Red Cross invested resources into working closely with communities and promoting messages created by government about eligibility, and managing community expectations. These resources may have been better invested in direct, material support to new arrivals.

4.3.4 The 449/786 visa eligibility cut-off date, being announced on short notice, caused confusion and was problematic for families who were due to arrive on or after 31 July 2022 but impacted by flight cancellations and lack of earlier flights. The cut-off date also has resulted in some family members being on different visa types and eligible for different services, for example, where a mother and children arrived first (and transitioned to a 786 visa) but the father arrived after 31 July 2022 on visitor visa (600) and could not access the 786 visa pathway.

4.3.5 Families of different nationalities faced unique barriers. For example, Australian Red Cross is aware of barriers experienced by families of mixed nationality. For example, a couple of Ukrainian and Russian nationalities, who had left their home in Ukraine and found the supports available for the partner with a Ukraine passport were different to those from the person with a Russian passport, rather than being based on their needs.

4.3.6 To gain a visa (449/786), applicants were required to have a BUPA health check. This incurred a fee, which many new arrivals could not afford. Following advocacy, the Australian Government provided the Australian Federation of Ukranian Organisations (AFUO) with a grant to support people on the HSP to fund the cost of the BUPA medical. The process for authentication of clients created privacy and data sharing risks, and the distribution of funds was logistically challenging, time consuming and resulted in double-handling of funds. It would have been better for an agreement to be reached directly with BUPA for an exemption for clients in this group.

4.3.7 Consistent with other responses, access to housing was often a barrier for people who approached Australian Red Cross for support. Teams spent substantial time supporting new arrivals to identify and find accommodation.

4.3.8 While Ukrainian community groups and societies existed, they generally had (until this response) been local voluntary led organisations with limited capacity or preparedness training for a response of this nature. They rapidly responded to support their communities; however this response took time and investment from community leaders, members and support organisations.

4.4 Australian Red Cross is mindful that while the provision of temporary visas for the purpose of protection provides immediate protection and safety, the medium term uncertainty caused requires ongoing monitoring and review, particularly while the conflict continues. Many people who use our services have spoken with Australian Red Cross people about their uncertainty about what happens once their 3-year temporary protection visa runs out.

4.5 Research conducted by the University of New South Wales as part of the longitudinal Refugee Adjustment Study found that:

4.5.1 changing from low to high visa security is associated with significant reductions in depression symptoms, symptoms PTSD and reduced social living difficulties and immigration-related living difficulties; and

4.5.2   people on insecure visa status were 2.4 times more likely to report suicidal intent (compared to those with secure visa status).

4.6   To replicate the good practice and lessons learnt through this response to other responses, Australian Red Cross recommends that the Australian Government review the Australian Government's domestic emergency response in evacuations (AUSRECEPLAN) and disaster and conflict-related migration (e.g. Afghanistan, Ukraine, Sudan, Israel and Occupied Palestinian Territories) and support for migrants in Australia when disasters (caused by both man-made and natural events including climate change) strike overseas.

4.7   This review could consider:

4.7.1   the provision of a safety net and access to supports to ensure people on temporary visas have access to support during times of crisis and can meet their basic humanitarian needs, including access to housing, health care, childcare, and transport;

4.7.2   the most appropriate visa pathway, considering the known detrimental impact of insecure visas on people's wellbeing and ways to mitigate insecurity;

4.7.3   the annual humanitarian intake, its sufficiency and the relationship emergency responses have on that intake;

4.7.4   the sufficiency of complementary pathways to protection through community, employment and education sponsorship in addition to the humanitarian intake;

4.7.5   whether broader eligibility and increased flexibility for family visa pathways particularly for separated family members would be beneficial; and

4.7.6   access, equity and safety of a response – the extent to which emergency responses consider people's needs, for example, access to services including disability and aged care services, or the availability of mental health services and interpreting services where there are very few accredited professionals due to historically low levels of migration and need in certain language groups.

4.7.7   Australia's role in improving regional responses, for example, through adoption of the Global Compact on Regular, Safe and Orderly Migration.

4.8   Standardising a response to emergencies overseas will ultimately reduce human suffering by helping to ensure national organisations like Australian Red Cross are prepared, community groups have the training and resources to stand up responses, and the wider population understands the criteria behind decisions to activate supports and to create regular, safe and orderly pathways for particular population groups.

Recommendation 3

The Australian Government develop a consistent and coordinated domestic approach to respond to the humanitarian needs of people impacted by crises and disasters overseas, including when crises are protracted. This could include emergency evacuations, safe and regular pathways to Australia, and support for migrants in Australia.

Conclusion

Australia's support for Ukraine during the ongoing conflict must be multifaceted and strategic, addressing key areas of humanitarian funding and response, migration impacts, and adherence to IHL.

In essence, Australia's comprehensive approach to supporting Ukraine should prioritise humanitarian needs, local empowerment, adherence to international legal frameworks, and responsible engagement in conflict-related matters. The recommendations in this submission underscore Australia's commitment to humanitarian values, international law, and effective crisis response in a global context.

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