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War of Donbass: The Forgotten Humanitarian Crisis

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ABSTRACT

The tension between the Ukrainian army and the pro-Russian separatists of the Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic, which declared independence in 2014 with military support from Moscow, shows no sign of abating. Despite the Minsk ceasefire agreement, conflict continues to affect everyday life; the hiss of bullets flying overhead and the crack of far-off sniper fire are familiar sounds. The regular Ukrainian army patrols the trenches and fights on the front line because pro-Russian snipers are positioned nearby. Along the 400 kilometers of the Donbass "contact line" the fighting continues, while thousands of civilians are trapped in the villages nearby. They still live in what remains of their homes. In this no-man's-land, where internal fragmentation and international isolation have caused this wearying conflict to be forgotten, people continue to die. And civilians live every day as the last.

In this paper the author would like to elucidate the matter and throw a remedy of light in the on the ongoing crisis in the conflict zone.

In the first chapter the author will analyze the cause of the conflict, tracking back to history of Minsk ceasefire agreement. Then in the next chapter the author will focus on the Living condition and the hustle that the civilian has to face because of the conflict. In the third chapter the author will try to give a focus on the humanitarian crisis of the conflict zone along with the war crimes that has been committed. In the next chapter the author would like to kingpin the ongoing refugee problem in that conflict zone.

Finally the author would like to conclude in the final chapter on the humanitarian response of the conflict zone and different approaches of different international organization towards this.

Keyword: War, International isolation, Protection of civilians, War Crimes, Refugee.

I. INTRODUCTION

This prolonged crisis in Ukraine is going on since 2014. The Ukraine crisis is a power struggle between factions within Ukraine. One of the factions wants to align with the European Union and the other with Russia. As one of the founding states of the Soviet Union, Ukraine had been an important contributor to the Soviet Union's economy between 1920–

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1991² In March of 2014, the current crisis erupted when Russian Special Forces occupied Ukraine's Crimean peninsula, claiming it was protecting its port access to the Black Sea³ Ukraine had planned to develop Crimea's natural gas reserves in two years in a partnership with U.S. companies. If it had accomplished this, Russia would have lost one of its largest customers Between 2014–2018, a military conflict between Ukrainian soldiers and Russian-backed separatists continued in eastern Ukraine, and more than 10,000 people were killed.⁴ On November 25, 2018, Russian ships attacked and boarded three Ukrainian vessels in the Crimean port of Azov near the Black Sea It placed a freighter to block the port, stating that Ukraine had violated Russian waters, although the two sides signed an agreement in 2003 to guarantee free passage through the strait.⁵ Critics at the United Nations Security Council meeting said Russia's attack was a violation under international law The North Atlantic Treaty Organization increased its military presence in the area.

In 2014, Russia annexed the Crimea peninsula of Ukraine, with the help of pro-Russian separatist. Following this Russia conducted several military actions Crimea peninsula is located at the north of the black sea. In 2018, Russian navy seized three Ukrainian ships in the Crimea Peninsula⁶

Despite the Minsk ceasefire agreement, conflict continues to affect everyday life; the hiss of bullets flying overhead and the crack of far-off sniper fire are familiar sounds The regular Ukrainian army patrols the trenches and fights on the front line because pro-Russian snipers are positioned nearby

Along the 400 kilometres of the Donbass "contact line" the fighting continues, while thousands of civilians are trapped in the villages nearby They still live in what remains of their homes. In this no-man's-land, where internal fragmentation and international isolation have caused this wearying conflict to be forgotten, people continue to die. And civilians live every day as the last⁷

² Ukraine Trek. "History of Ukraine - the Soviet Union Period." <https://ukrainetrek.com/about-ukraine-history/soviet-union-period> Accessed Jan. 15, 2020.

³ The Ohio State University. "The Ukrainian Crisis: In Russia's Long Shadow," <http://origins.osu.edu/article/ukrainian-crisis-russias-long-shadow> Accessed Jan. 15, 2020

⁴ Crisis Group. "Russia and the Separatists in Eastern Ukraine." <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/eastern-europe/ukraine/russia-and-separatists-eastern-ukraine> Accessed Jan. 15, 2020.

⁵ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. "Kyiv Says Russia Attacked Ukrainian Navy Ships, Seized Three In Black Sea." <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-russian-ship-rams-navy-tugboat-off-crimea-azov/29619665.html> Accessed Jan. 15, 2020.

⁶ <https://currentaffairs.gktoday.in/tags/ukraine-crisis>, Accessed on 15th Jan,2020

⁷ Erki Messori; Ukrain's forgotten war; <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/ukraine-forgotten-war-190407053834708.html>

II. HISTORY BEHIND THE CONFLICT

It began as a dispute over a trade agreement, but it mushroomed into the bloodiest conflict in Europe since the wars over the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s.⁸ The crisis in Ukraine began with protests in the capital city of Kiev in November 2013 against Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich's decision to reject a deal for greater economic integration with the European Union. After a violent crackdown by state security forces unintentionally drew an even greater number of protesters and escalated the conflict, President Yanukovich fled the country in February 2014.⁹

In March 2014, Russian troops took control of Ukraine's Crimean region, before formally annexing the peninsula after Crimeans voted to join the Russian Federation in a disputed local referendum. Russian President Vladimir Putin cited the need to protect the rights of Russian citizens and Russian speakers in Crimea and southeast Ukraine. The crisis heightened ethnic divisions, and two months later pro-Russian separatists in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of eastern Ukraine held a referendum to declare independence from Ukraine.¹⁰

Violence in eastern Ukraine between Russian-backed separatist forces and the Ukrainian military has by conservative estimates killed more than 10,300 people and injured nearly 24,000 since April 2014. Although Moscow has denied its involvement, Ukraine and NATO have reported the buildup of Russian troops and military equipment near Donetsk and Russian cross-border shelling.¹¹

In July 2014, the situation in Ukraine escalated into an international crisis and put the United States and the European Union (EU) at odds with Russia when a Malaysian Airlines flight was shot down over Ukrainian airspace, killing all 298 onboard. Dutch air accident investigators concluded in October 2015 that the plane had been downed by a Russian-built surface-to-air missile. In September 2016, investigators said that the missile system was provided by Russia, determining it was moved into eastern Ukraine and then back to Russian territory following the downing of the airplane.¹²

Since February 2015, France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine have attempted to broker a

⁸ Nick Thomson; Ukraine: Everything you need to know about how we got here <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/02/10/europe/ukraine-war-how-we-got-here/index.html>

⁹ Global conflict tracker; Council on foreign relations; <https://www.cfr.org/interactive/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ukraine>; Last accessed on 1st April 2020

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Supra Note 8

¹² Ibid

cessation in violence through the Minsk Accords. The agreement includes provisions for a cease-fire, withdrawal of heavy weaponry, and full Ukrainian government control throughout the conflict zone. However, efforts to reach a diplomatic settlement and satisfactory resolution have been unsuccessful.¹³

In April 2016, NATO announced that the alliance would deploy four battalions to Eastern Europe, rotating troops through Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland to deter possible future Russian aggression elsewhere in Europe, particularly in the Baltics. These battalions were joined by two U.S. Army tank brigades, deployed to Poland in September 2017 to further bolster the alliance's deterrence presence.¹⁴

Ukraine has been the target of a number of cyberattacks since the conflict started in 2014. In December 2015, more than 225,000 people lost power across Ukraine in an attack, and in December 2016 parts of Kiev experienced another power blackout following a similar attack targeting a Ukrainian utility company. In June 2017, government and business computer systems in Ukraine were hit by the NotPetya cyberattack; the crippling attack, attributed to Russia, spread to computer systems worldwide and caused billions of dollars in damages.¹⁵ The conflict in Ukraine risks further deterioration of U.S.-Russia relations and greater escalation if Russia expands its presence in Ukraine or into NATO countries. Russia's actions have raised wider concerns about its intentions elsewhere in Eastern Europe, and a Russian incursion into a NATO country would solicit a response from the United States as a NATO ally. The conflict has heightened tensions in Russia's relations with both the United States and Europe, complicating the prospects for cooperation elsewhere including on issues of terrorism, arms control, and a political solution in Syria.¹⁶

III. LIVING CONDITION OF THE CONFLICT ZONE

For more than five years, Russian forces and their proxies have waged a bloody war against Ukrainian forces in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. The conflict has claimed more than 13,000 lives, driven almost two million people from their homes, and caused immense material damage. France and Germany have together sought to broker peace but failed to produce a durable cease-fire—let alone a political settlement. The number of confirmed fatalities (deaths) caused by the war was 13,000–13,200 as of mid-February 2020. By this point, the UN confirmed 3,350 civilians had been killed in the conflict. 312 of the civilian

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Supra Note 8

deaths were foreigners: 298 passengers and crew of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, 11 Russian journalists, an Italian journalist, and one Russian civilian killed in cross-border shelling and a Lithuanian diplomat.

At the beginning of June 2015, the Donetsk region's prosecutors reported 1,592 civilians had gone missing in government-controlled areas, of which 208 had been located. At the same time, a report by the United Nations stated 1,331–1,460 people were missing, including at least 378 soldiers and 216 civilians. 345 unidentified bodies, of mostly soldiers, were also confirmed to be held at morgues in the Dnepropetrovsk Oblast or buried. In all, as of late October, 774 people were missing according to the government, including 271 soldiers. By the end of December 2017, the number of confirmed missing on the Ukrainian side was 402, including 123 soldiers. The separatists also reported 433 missing on their side by mid-December 2016.

As of mid-March 2015, according to the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), 1,553 separatists had been released from captivity during prisoner exchanges between the two sides. Subsequently, Ukraine released another 322 people by late February 2016, while by September, 1,598 security forces members and 1,484 civilians had been released by the rebels. 1,110 separatist fighters and supporters, including 743 civilians, were reportedly still being held by Ukrainian forces as of late March 2016. The figure of separatist prisoners was updated to 816, including 287–646 civilians, in December. At the end of May 2015, the Ukrainian commander of Donetsk airport, Oleg Kuzminykh, who was captured during the battle for the complex, was released.

In December 2017, a large prisoner exchange took place where the rebels released 73 out of 176 prisoners they were holding, while Ukraine released 306 out of 380 of their prisoners. Out of those that were released by Ukraine, 29 brought to the exchange point refused to go back to separatist-held territory, while 40 who were already previously released did not show up for the exchange. Meanwhile, out of those released by the rebels, 32 were soldiers. This brought the overall number of prisoners released by the rebels to 3,215. Among those still held by the separatists, 74 were soldiers. The number of released prisoners was updated to 3,224 in late June 2018, while the number of those still held by the rebels was put at 113. At the end of December 2019, a new prisoner exchange took place, with Ukraine releasing 124 separatist fighters and their supporters, while 76 prisoners, including 12 soldiers, were returned to Ukraine by the rebels. Another five or six prisoners released by the separatists decided to stay in rebel-controlled territories.

Living conditions in the combat zone deteriorated heavily amidst a new separatist offensive in January 2015.¹⁷ Tens of thousands of people were suffering hunger. Medicines were largely unavailable. The worst affected were those that lived in the sprawling rural areas outside of major cities, who often lacked access coal for heating during the bitter winter. The situation was greatly exacerbated by the late 2014 move by the Ukrainian government to cut off all pension payments to people in the separatist-controlled areas, along with hospital, nursing home, prison, and orphanage funding.¹⁸ According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs early 2016 69% of households in separatist controlled areas had difficulty accessing food markets due to rising prices and poverty.¹⁹ The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) stated in an April 2016 report that almost 300,000 people in the combat zone were severely food insecure and in need of immediate food assistance.²⁰ Separatist authorities have banned most international medical organizations and have taken a hard line on drug addiction, making methadone and substitution therapy illegal. As a result, people living with HIV/AIDS (reportedly three times higher Donbass than in the rest of Ukraine) have fled separatist-controlled areas.²¹

The Eastern Human Rights Group (EHRG) released a rapport that stated that 5,000 people in Luhansk People's Republic were held in solitary confinement, beaten, starved or tortured if they refuse to carry out unpaid work. They claimed to have evidence that the situation was similar in Donetsk People's Republic. According to the EHRG "All this takes place for the purpose of enriching a certain group of people in the so-called LPR." Inmates conditions had deteriorated in separatist controlled detention centers and relatives paid LPR authorities to ensure the safety of inmates.²²

Late September/early October water stations located in the government-controlled area of Luhansk Oblast stopped functioning as a result of unpaid electricity bills. After the International Committee of the Red Cross paid \$700,000 to cover debts for power and water

¹⁷ Rick Lyman; Shivering, Hungry and Tearful in Rebel-Held Eastern Ukraine; *he New York Times*. 6 February 2015. Retrieved 7 February 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/07/world/europe/shivering-hungry-and-tearful-in-rebel-held-eastern-ukraine.html>

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Stanytsia Luhanska; Hard lines: Access issues deepen Ukraine aid crisis; *The Humanitarian*; <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/feature/2016/03/04/hard-lines-access-issues-deepen-ukraine-aid-crisis>; Last accessed on 1st April, 2020

²⁰ Conflict In Eastern Ukraine Leaves 1.5 Million People Hungry; *World food programme*; <https://www.wfp.org/news/conflict-eastern-ukraine-leaves-15-million-people-hungry>; Last accessed on 1st April 2020

²¹ HIV: East Ukraine's Silent Crisis; *Radio Free Europe*; *Radio liberty*; <https://www.rferl.org/a/internally-displaced-women-living-with-hiv/27873176.html> ; Last accessed on 1st April 2020

²² Patrick Evans; 'Slave labour' in the prisons of eastern Ukraine; <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-37512356>

supplies in the separatist controlled territories of Luhansk Oblast they resumed working.²³

IV. COMMISSION OF WAR CRIMES AND THE REFUGEE CRISIS

The concept of war crimes has ancient roots, rules on war crimes started to develop at the end of the 19th century. War crimes is the willful killing, torture or inhuman treatment, including willfully causing great suffering or serious injury to body or health, unlawful deportation or transfer or unlawful confinement of a protected person, taking of hostages and extensive destruction and appropriation of property, not justified by military necessity and carried out unlawfully and wantonly.²⁴ The Geneva Conventions established that states could exercise jurisdiction over such crimes. Over recent decades, international courts such as the Yugoslavia Tribunal and the International Criminal Court (ICC) have exercised jurisdiction over individuals accused of war crimes. According to the United Nations, a war crime is a serious breach of international law committed against civilians or "enemy combatants" during an international or domestic armed conflict. A war crime occurs when superfluous injury or unnecessary suffering is inflicted upon an enemy. In spite of the outrage caused by the bombing of a school or a country's TV station, such actions do not necessarily amount to war crimes. Such bombing will only be a war crime if the extent of civilian casualties resulting from the attack is excessive compared to the military advantage gained from the attack. In contrast with genocide and crimes against humanity, war crimes have to occur in the context of armed conflict.²⁵

Human Right Watch said that Ukrainian government forces, pro-government paramilitaries, and the insurgents had used unguided Grad rockets in attacks on civilian areas, stating that "The use of indiscriminate rockets in populated areas violates international humanitarian law, or the laws of war, and may amount to war crimes".²⁶ It also stated that pro-Russian insurgents "failed to take all feasible precautions to avoid deploying in civilian areas" and in one case "actually moved closer to populated areas as a response to government shelling". Human Rights Watch documented Grad rocket use in civilian areas in the fighting at Donetsk railway station on 21 July, in Kuibyshevskyi district of Donetsk city on 19 July, and in Petrovskyi district of Donetsk city and Marynivka on 12 July. It called on all sides to

²³ ICRC to repay Ukraine utilities debts for occupied Luhans; <https://www.unian.info/economics/1558392-icrc-to-repay-ukraine-utilities-debts-for-occupied-luhansk.html>; Last accessed on 4th April, 2020

²⁴ Art.147 of 4th Geneva convention

²⁵ Explainer: What is war crime?; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/explainer-war-crime-191021062757444.html> Last accessed on 4th April 2020

²⁶ Russia Must Recognize Ukraine Rebels' Human Rights Abuses; Moscow times; August 6, 2014 9:15AM EDT, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/08/06/russia-must-recognize-ukraine-rebels-human-rights-abuses>; Last accessed on 4th April 2020

stop using the "notoriously imprecise" Grad rockets.²⁷

Another report by Human Rights Watch said that the insurgents had been running amok...taking, beating and torturing hostages, as well as wantonly threatening and beating people who are pro-Kiev . It also said that the insurgents had destroyed medical equipment, threatened medical staff, and occupied hospitals. A member of Human Rights Watch witnessed the exhumation of a mass grave in Sloviansk that was uncovered after insurgents retreated from the city²⁸

Amnesty International released a report that documented war crimes committed by pro-government paramilitary territorial defense battalions on 8 September. The report focused on the Aidar Battalion, which operates in the northern part of Luhansk Oblast Amnesty International Secretary General Salil Shetty, met with Ukrainian prime minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk on the same day, and urged him and his government to bring the territorial defence battalions under effective lines of command and control, to promptly investigate all allegations of abuses and to hold those responsible to account She said that the Ukrainian government should not "replicate the lawlessness and abuses that have prevailed in areas previously held by separatists", and that "the failure to stop abuses and possible war crimes by volunteer battalions risks significantly aggravating tensions in the east of the country and undermining the proclaimed intentions of the new Ukrainian authorities to strengthen and uphold the rule of law more broadly".²⁹ Amnesty International documented cases of summary executions by both pro-Russian and Ukrainian forces It also said that many abuses were deliberately misreported as "accidents". The report said that an Amnesty International team found no traces of "mass graves", but said that they had documented isolated incidents that could constitute war crimes It also noted that accusations of abuses were being "inflated" as part of a "propaganda war" waged by both sides, but particularly by Russia.³⁰ It was also reported that new evidence of summary killings of Ukrainian soldiers on 9 April 2015 Having reviewed video footage, it determined that at least four Ukrainian soldiers had been shot dead "execution style". AI deputy director for Europe and Central Asia Denis Krivosheev said that "the new evidence of these summary killings confirms what we have

²⁷ *ibid*

²⁸ *Supra* note 25

²⁹ Ukraine must stop ongoing abuses and war crimes by pro-Ukrainian volunteer forces; 8 September 2014, 00:00 UTC; <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2014/09/ukraine-must-stop-ongoing-abuses-and-war-crimes-pro-ukrainian-volunteer-forces/> ; Last accessed on 4th April 2020

³⁰ Eastern Ukraine conflict: Summary killings, misrecorded and misreported; Amnesty International; 20 October 2014, 00:00 UTC ; <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2014/10/eastern-ukraine-conflict-summary-killings-misrecorded-and-misreported/> ; Last accessed on 4th April 2020

suspected for a long time".³¹ UN Assistant Secretary-General for human rights Ivan Šimonović stated that the majority of human rights violations committed during the conflict were carried out by the separatists. He also said, however, that this could not be used as an excuse by Ukrainian forces to commit human rights violations.³²

Some refugees from the Donbass fled to parts of western and central Ukraine, such as Poltava Oblast. Around 2,000 families from the Donbass were reported to have taken refuge in the southern Ukrainian city of Odessa. Other refugees from Luhansk fled to Russia during the week-long ceasefire that was declared 23 June 2014 and in effect until 27 June. As of June 2014, at least 110,000 people had left Ukraine for Russia in the wake of the conflict, according to a United Nations report. Refugees clustered around Rostov-on-Don, with 12,900 people, including 5,000 children, housed in public buildings and tent camps there. Similarly, the report stated that around 54,400 are internally displaced people (IDPs) within Ukraine itself.³³ Between 15,000 and 20,000 refugees arrived in Svyatogorsk from Sloviansk after the Ukrainian Armed Forces intensified shelling on the city at the end of May. Remaining residents of the besieged city were without water, gas, and electricity. Despite this, most residents remained. Russian officials said that 70,000 refugees had fled across the border into Russia since the fighting began. Camps for internally displaced people were established in Kharkiv Oblast. Some reported they had lost their livelihoods and feared they would be unable to continue working with Ukrainian professional licenses while others feared being forced to acquire Russian citizenship. And some said they had received personal threats on account of their political opinion or ethnic or linguistic background. Challenges faced by the displaced included access to social services; long-term shelter and employment; and difficulties transferring residence registration. Insecurity in some areas of Ukraine was hampering access to many areas where displaced people were located.

The United Nations OHCHR reports show that most of the internally displaced people had fled to Russia. Having been inundated with refugees from the Donbass, the Russian government established a resettlement programme that was meant to encourage refugees to settle in "far-flung" parts of Russia. This program included guarantees of employment, accommodation, pensions, and a path to Russian citizenship. According to a 31 August report

³¹ New evidence of summary killings of Ukrainian soldiers must spark urgent investigations; <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/04/ukraine-new-evidence-of-summary-killings-of-captured-soldiers-must-spark-urgent-investigations/>; Last accessed on 4th April 2020

³² "Majority of human rights violations in Ukraine committed by militants - UN". Interfax-Ukraine News Agency. 15 December 2014. <https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/239935.html>; Last accessed on 4th April 2020

³³ UN refugee agency warns of 'sharp rise' in people fleeing eastern Ukraine; <https://news.un.org/en/story/2014/06/471952-un-refugee-agency-warns-sharp-rise-people-fleeing-eastern-ukraine>; Last accessed on 5th April, 2020

by the administration of Rostov Oblast, 42,718 Donbass refugees had been transported to cities across Russia for resettlement.³⁴ As the shaky ceasefire implemented by the Minsk Protocol became increasingly untenable in early November, it was reported that the number of people that had fled insurgent-held areas of Donbass had reached one and a half million.³⁵ The UN identified that 75% of the IDPs had resettled amidst their communities in the provinces of Luhansk, Donetsk, Kharkiv, Zaporizhyya and Dnipropetrovsk. The early March 2016 report states that 1.6 million people were registered internally displaced by the Ukrainian government 800,000 to 1 million of them lived within Ukrainian government controlled Ukraine.³⁶

V. HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

Many states and international organizations have reacted to the ongoing war in the Donbass region of Ukraine, which began in April 2014. In August 2014 when the intervention of Russian troops in Donbass scaled up, many states condemned this violation of Ukraine's sovereignty

An emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council on the subject of the humanitarian situation in Donbass was held on 5 August at Russia's behest. Russia proposed that a "humanitarian mission" be sent to Ukraine to help alleviate the suffering of civilians in the region. Western governments responded hesitantly to the proposal, with British permanent representative to the United Nations Sir Mark Lyall Grant saying "It is deeply ironic that Russia should call for an emergency meeting of the council to discuss a humanitarian crisis largely of its own creation".³⁷

The government of Russia stated that it would send a humanitarian convoy to Luhansk city on 11 August, which was completely cut off from electrical power, water, food, and gas supplies amidst a government offensive on insurgents in the city. According to government spokesman Dmitry Peskov, the convoy would be dispatched under the "aegis of the Red Cross". Western governments were weary of the plan, which NATO secretary general Anders Fogh Rasmussen said was part of "developing the narrative and the pretext" for an invasion of Ukraine "under the guise of a humanitarian operation". The government of Ukraine said

³⁴ September 2014; Andrew Roth; Shellshocked Ukrainians flee to new lives in Russia; *The New York Times*; <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/05/world/europe/shellshocked-ukrainians-flee-to-a-new-life-in-russia.html>; Last accessed on 5th April, 2020

³⁵ Nowhere to run; *The New York Times*; https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/14/world/europe/nowhere-to-run-in-eastern-ukraine-.html?_r=0; Last accessed on 5th April, 2020

³⁶ <https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/328981.html>; Last accessed on 5th April, 2020

³⁷ Russia calls for humanitarian mission to Ukraine as Poland sounds a warning; *The Christian Science Monitor*; <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Security-Watch/terrorism-security/2014/0806/Russia-calls-for-humanitarian-mission-to-Ukraine-as-Poland-sounds-a-warning>; Last accessed on 5th April, 2020

that the convoy would not be allowed to cross the border into Ukraine. Despite this, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that an agreement between Ukrainian and Russian government officials had been made, which would allow the convoy to drive to the border. At the border, the goods carried would be unloaded and put onto Ukrainian lorries.³⁸

Amnesty International reported on 24 December 2014 that pro-government volunteer territorial defence battalions were blocking Ukrainian aid convoys from entering separatist-controlled territory. These battalions, such as the Dnipro, Aidar, Donbas and Right Sector, have stopped most convoys from passing through, including those sent by Ukrainian oligarch Rinat Akhmetov. According to the report, the battalions believe that the aid will be sold by the separatists, rather than provided to residents of the Donbass. Furthermore, battalion members insisted that separatist forces needed to release prisoners of war if aid was to be allowed through. As a result of the war, more than half of those residents remaining in the Donbass rely entirely on humanitarian aid. Director of Europe and Central Asia for Amnesty International Denis Krivosheev said that "Checking the content of humanitarian convoys crossing frontline is one thing. Preventing it is another. Attempting to create unbearable conditions of life is a whole new ballgame. Using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare is a war crime. In addition, the report said that the volunteer battalions often act like "renegade gangs", and called on the Ukrainian government to bring them under control.³⁹

In 2017, the ICRC continued to help the most vulnerable people affected by the conflict, residing along the contact line in Donbas. They provided food, water, hygiene products and other basic household items, maintained the heating/cooling points and provided the first aid modules for the checkpoints, distributed thousands of tons of coal, heating briquettes and insulation materials. Our teams restored houses and essential civilian infrastructure, supported small business initiatives, delivered construction materials to health care and education institutions. The ICRC consultants provided psychosocial support sessions for the people traumatized by the conflict and ensured necessary medical supplies at health care facilities.⁴⁰

The EU began imposing sanctions on Russia in March 2014, following the annexation of Crimea, with the lists of sanctioned individuals and entities having been expanded multiple

³⁸ Russian aid convoy heads for Ukraine amid doubts over lorries' contents; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/12/russian-aid-convoy-ukraine-humanitarian>; Last accessed on 5th April, 2020

³⁹ Eastern Ukraine: Humanitarian disaster looms as food aid blocked; 24 December 2014, 00:00 UTC; <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2014/12/eastern-ukraine-humanitarian-disaster-looms-food-aid-blocked/>; Last Accessed on 7th April, 2020

⁴⁰ Ukraine: In 2017, ICRC helped thousands of people affected by Donbas conflict; <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/ukraine-thousands-people-help-conflict-donbas-2017>; Last Accessed on 7th April 2020

times concurrently with escalations in Donbass President of the European Council Donald Tusk stated that Russia was compensating for its shortcomings by destructive, aggressive and bullying tactics against its neighbors.⁴¹

It attempted to debunk the Russian government's accusations against the Ukrainian government, and also other statements made by Russia to justify its presence in Ukraine According to the statement, Russia attempted to divert attention away from its actions and levelled a series of accusations against NATO which are based on misrepresentations of the facts . It also said that Russia made baseless attacks on the legitimacy of the Ukrainian authorities and has used force to seize part of Ukraine's territory .⁴²In response to the unauthorized entry of the Russian humanitarian convoy on 22 August, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen stated that this incident could only deepen the crisis in the region, which Russia itself has created and has continued to fuel The disregard of international humanitarian principles raises further questions about whether the true purpose of the aid convoy is to support civilians or to resupply armed separatists . NATO general Philip Breedlove said on 20 September that the ceasefire implemented as part of the Minsk Protocol was "a ceasefire in name only", and criticized Russia for allowing men and equipment to flow freely across its border into Donbass.⁴³

VI. CONCLUSION

It began as a dispute over a trade agreement, but it mushroomed into the bloodiest conflict in Europe since the wars over the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s After Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 following tensions with its neighbor, world leaders managed to install a shaky peace deal in 2015 But violence continues in the conflict zone in eastern Ukraine -- 2016 saw an increase in casualties and 2017 has kicked off with a flareup of fighting.

Despite being an independent country since 1991, Ukraine has been perceived by Russia as being part of its sphere of interest After the collapse of the Soviet Union, both nations retained very close ties. Ukrainian forces and Russian-backed separatists have pulled back from three frontline towns There is now momentum towards a de-escalation, after landmark talks between Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky and Russian President Vladimir Putin. But there is still a long way to go. More than 13,000 people have died in the conflict

⁴¹ Alastair Macdonald, Adrian Croft; EU defies Russian 'bully' but disappoints ex-Soviets; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-eu/eu-defies-russian-bully-but-disappoints-ex-soviets-idUSKBN0062EL20150521>; Last Accessed on 7th April 2020

⁴² NATO-Russia relations: the facts; https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_111767.htm ; Last Accessed on 7th April 2020

⁴³ *ibid*

between Ukraine's military and Russian-backed rebels. According to Western intelligence, Russia has sent regular troops and heavy weapons to help the Donbas separatists. Moscow denies that, but admits that "Russian volunteers" are fighting there. The conflict has displaced more than 1.5 million people - and that complicates plans to hold elections in rebel-held areas.

The International Committee of the Red Cross described the events in the Donbass region as a "non-international armed conflict".⁴⁴ Some news agencies, such as the Information Telegraph Agency of Russia and Reuters, interpreted this statement as meaning that Ukraine was in a state of "civil war". From early September 2014, Amnesty International said that it considered the war to be "international", as opposed to "non-international". Secretary General of Amnesty International Salil Shetty said that "satellite images, coupled with reports of Russian troops captured inside Ukraine and eyewitness accounts of Russian troops and military vehicles rolling across the border leave no doubt that this is now an international armed conflict". The conflict has also been classified as a "hybrid war" waged by Russia against Ukraine.

⁴⁴ Article 3 common to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949