

Ukraine. Fr Ladnyuk (Dnipro): “Do not grow weary of this war, we are there at the front and we see people die”



. a Salesian Greek Catholic priest who gave us a dramatic testimony from Dnipro. News agencies instantly broke the news. The body of a two-year-old toddler was found under the rubble. Twenty-two people were wounded in the attack, including five children. Three of them are in critical condition. War has no regard for the age of its casualties. **A total of 485 children have died since the outbreak of the large-scale war**, confirmed Ukrainian President Zelensky in his daily message, released on the day marking the International Day of Innocent Children Victims of Aggression. “The number of deaths is a number that we can officially confirm, knowing the data of each child,” the president said. “Unfortunately, the actual number is higher. Every time we liberate our land from Russian occupiers, we learn the awful truth about the occupation.” In addition to the victims, the utter lack of comprehensive information on the hundreds of thousands of children deported to Russia is a cause for serious concern. “Thanks to extensive efforts - Zelensky said - 371 deported children have been brought back to Ukraine so far. However, we are certain that at least 19,505 Ukrainian children were deported, and this is only a fraction of all our young Ukrainian children who are still in the enemy's hands.” **“The situation is extremely serious,”** said the Salesian priest. “There was not a day in the last two weeks when the alarms didn't sound. We heard the gunshots. There were nights when no one could sleep. We heard loud rumbles and the night sky was lit up by the firing of missiles and drones.” The mission of the Church, in this case of the Salesian father, continues despite the difficulties. “We operate on three fronts,” Father Oleh explained. “We assist civilians with the distribution of basic necessities such as food, medicines and essential items. At the same time, we are helping with evacuations. We helped an elderly man who was struggling to leave the town of Bakhmut a few days ago, acting on the soldiers' notification. Finally, we launched a project under the auspices of the International Development Volunteering service (VIS), a non-governmental organisation run by the Salesians. The project has a dual purpose, as it concerns both the physical

and psychological wellbeing of the local population. In practical terms, mobile teams of psychologists and assistants travel to villages in the Donbas, where they make use of two main tools: playing and psychological counselling to improve mental wellbeing and resilience mechanisms to cope with the traumas of war. "We endured one year of attacks and we are tired," the priest remarked. "People are not sleeping, and when you don't sleep everything is harder."



My request to Italy and Europe is: don't grow weary of this war. People are getting used to it and their support is declining. The Russians have committed a veritable genocide: they took our children, they tore down entire cities, they incarcerated in some of their prisons two of our priests over six months ago, they destroyed our churches, they searched and persecuted even those who were attending our church. No one should give in to this tragedy." **Children dying.** "As a Salesian priest, I know many children and, thanks to God, I managed to save many of them by evacuating them from front line areas," the priest remarked. "When a child dies, the suffering is immense, but there isn't only physical death. There is also a psychological death and it's terrible." "Human intellect and personality are formed during childhood. Here so many children were wounded, traumatised, and not only in the frontline zones but all over the country. Some children were forced to leave their homes and their towns; some children continue living in basements. There are children who don't go to school and struggle to sleep at night. These problems are not going to end with the war but will unfortunately continue for many more years. All this will one day have to be accounted for by the perpetrators."

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