

# Central Eurasian partners



## *Letters from the front line*

This is the story of 2 days on the frontline between Ukrainian and Russian troops. These last days we were visiting and helping Ukrainian people in places on the front line within sight of Russian troops.

One such sizeable village is Krasnogorivka. Here are some observations from a day there:



Impressions from the front line at Krasnogorivka:

- \* travelling with our CEP travel team or 6 such as a pastor friend whom I first had contact with over 30 years ago
- \*travelled hundreds of kilometres without a clutch
- \*passing numerous military checkpoints as we enter front line zones
- \*no children under 18 allowed in these zones

- \*a missile hanging unexploded in a tree as we speed by
- \*a woman asking advice what to do with an unexploded missile on her front room couch
- \*no shops to buy anything
- \*nothing functioning (schools, hospitals, buses, petrol, any movement or public life), apart from military vehicles. We have red cross signs on our van
- \*the checkpoints wave us through, after questioning...
- \*people living in dark, unfurnished and unlit basements with their bombed out flats above them...
- \*women see our van and run to their friends to tell them to come out of their basements
- \*only one bag of food and cosmetics per family...the van empties out quickly
- \*a drone watches us from above, presumably relating info back to Russian troops who then can send another drone, this time loaded (we hid under the trees and waited for some time)
- \*the skies are empty of planes...drones apparently have taken over the battlefield in the air
- \*an object in the air in the distance...is that a drone? No just a big bird...relief!
- \*tanks and military vehicles hide in the shade and shelter of the trees
- \*houses & flats freshly bombed today
- \*every 3-5 minutes in my sermon at a hastily arranged church service a missile blast is heard...some as loud as though in the next garden...the locals can tell the difference between ours and theirs. A loud blast followed some moments later by a thud in the distance signals that it's ours
- \*gun shooting indicates it's not only missiles shooting from a distance...
- \*talk with a freshly minted widow with 5 children whose husband was killed in their garden...how to have spiritual wisdom to comfort these people?
- \*little drinking water, or anything to drink...tomorrow we need to bring more water
- \*tears of grief
- \*tears of joy and thanks to God and us, as we hand out bread, washing powder, soap, tinned & jars of food...
- \*helmet and bulletproof vests are heavy...how to move fast in them?
- \*relief vans like ours come very rarely to the furthest forward front line where there is constant missile exchange
- \*military vehicles stop by our van to see what we have. Anything is gratefully received
- \*Russian troops on the horizon within firing range, as we speed through the visible and exposed section of the road
- \*fast driving on pot filled roads when we're in sight and in range of Russian guns and missiles
- \*this "grey zone" is "another world" from the communities functioning fairly normally a few dozen kilometres away
- \*the missiles being fired both ways all day don't even make the news...

And here's a report of another day and scrape with death and probably God's intervention.

Our scrape with death was on our day in Kupiansk ...for background info see:

<https://www.rferl.org/.../kupyansk-ukraine.../32087641.html>

Kupiansk is another small town on the front line under fire from the Russians in the woods outside of town. 3 military chaplains spent much of the day with our travel relief team. They warned us at the start of the day that not all of us may come back alive.

Most houses & buildings in this small town are damaged or destroyed. We visited some Ukrainian soldiers relaxing. They have 3 days non-stop on duty (including nights) and then 3 days free. In some places they have 6 or 10 days on duty which is super exhausting. All are keen to go home. The chaplain I talked with was not optimistic on the outcome of the war due to the fact that there are so many more Russian soldiers there than Ukrainians. Chaplains take bodies from the front line so we funded a bigger car for two of the chaplains for the wounded to lie down. The 3 chaplains talk to soldiers and get to know them. Other chaplains just preach at the soldiers. On our visit to a household of soldiers relaxing, we gave them food and drink and shared the gospel with them. We brought food packages and gospel booklets and I shared a message about hope and freedom against a background of missiles landing near and far. The soldiers listened attentively. The atmosphere here is quiet between blasts-little talk, no doubt as soldiers digest the traumatic experiences. For us being there was a few days, for them it is 3 years. My translator fainted at the end of my mini-sermon. The first time that has ever happened to me! The soldiers don't go on internet, so as not to be located. No TV, silence, contemplation, broken by the loud blasts every few minutes.

It is important to move quickly, to hide vehicles under trees, hidden from drones. To make sure to be in a safe place where you can't be seen. Around there is the noise of regular shooting. Missiles give a loud crack followed by a thud in the distance. Gunfire signals the sighting of approaching drones. Drones are a good investment as they save manned planes and deaths. All the noise is met with barely a reaction by the chaplains who face it much of the time most of the day, for years already. The soldiers stand or sit quietly, smoking, staring ahead, also not reacting to latest firing. They might comment if it is a Ukrainian or Russian army missile, obviously they learnt to differentiate it by the sound. Most civilians have moved out of their homes and left the area. The soldiers have moved into the houses.

The river bridge has been destroyed by retreating Russians, and there is a temporary bridge which the Russians are presently aiming to destroy. All the while in the grey and 0 zones there is missile or gun fire every few minutes. Many have hidden in their basements. The few out on the streets barely react to loud cracks of missile and gun fire.

Our day had a memorable climax. As we came back west across the bridge in our team's 2 cars driven by chaplains, our first car got over the bridge at high speed with no incident. About 100 metres further on we heard a very loud bang behind us. After a few seconds of shock our chaplain turned the car back to see if our 2nd car was ok. The Russians had fired at the bridge and hit a house next to it. The bridge was shrouded with smoke. We couldn't stop as he told us they usually fire 2 or 3 times around the same place once they have position and range, before quickly moving. It turned out that a woman in the 2nd car had thrown up just before the bridge so the driver stopped. She fainted twice that day. Thus they were not on the bridge when it was struck. Then they drove through the smoke-filled bridge to safety on our side. Only relative safety though, as a 2nd loud bang shook our car from a little further ahead. One of the things I've learnt about missiles is that when they land there is no time to escape. It blows up buildings, bridges and people in an unforeseen instant. Its too late to prepare. Very similar to death and the gospel.

We need to be **READY** at all times as you never know what might hit you. The gospel is the only eternal salvation.

There was no time to take photos for readers, only time to drive as fast as possible away from the bridge.

The chaplain told us that there are deaths from the missiles every week in this village.

A little maybe like a Hollywood film scene, except that the injuries, deaths and grief here are all too real.

Praise God for the intervention in the sickness before the bridge. Our lives are truly in His hands.