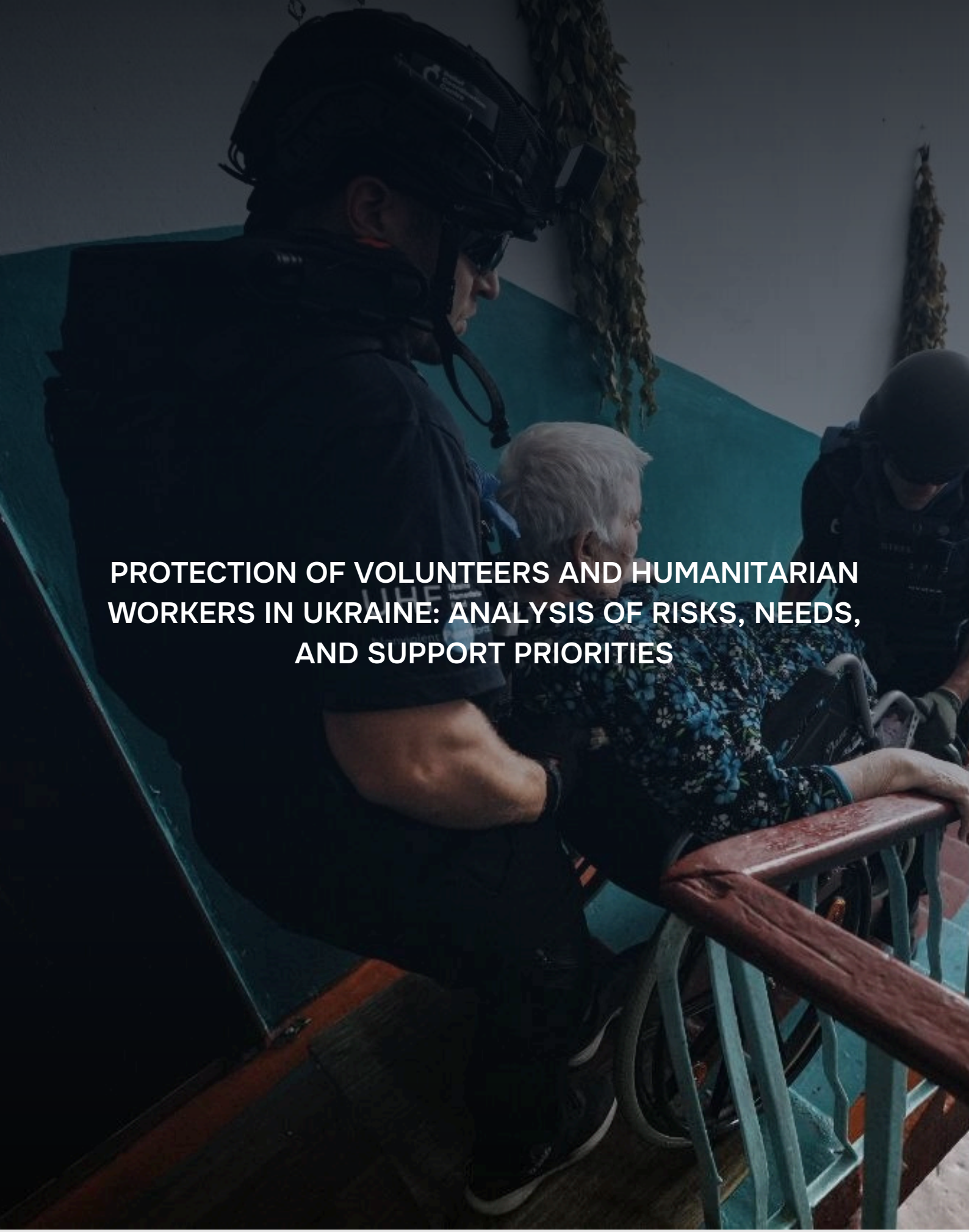


PROTECTION OF VOLUNTEERS AND HUMANITARIAN WORKERS IN UKRAINE: ANALYSIS OF RISKS, NEEDS, AND SUPPORT PRIORITIES

Relief Coordination Centre
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1.
INTRODUCTION

The humanitarian sector in Ukraine is facing a new level of challenges in 2025–2026. The rapid evolution of FPV drones, the expansion of risk zones, and the growing number of incidents targeting humanitarian transport create threats not only for humanitarian workers and volunteers, but also for the civilian population that depends on evacuation, humanitarian aid, and essential life-saving services.

In the current context, the safety of humanitarian missions can no longer be viewed as an internal matter of individual organizations. It is an integral component of humanitarian access and a prerequisite for the delivery of the humanitarian mandate.



When humanitarian teams are unable to operate safely in frontline communities, people lose the ability to evacuate from areas of danger, receive medical assistance, access livelihoods, and obtain other critically important support. Consequently, risks faced by humanitarian workers directly translate into risks for the civilian population.

That is why investments in duty of care, secure communications, insurance, staff training, armored transport, psychological support, and modern early threat detection systems should be regarded not as administrative costs, but as a necessary condition for ensuring continuous humanitarian response.

Maintaining humanitarian access requires joint action by the Humanitarian Country Team, donors, international organizations, government authorities, and local humanitarian actors. Supporting the safety of humanitarian missions today is an investment in the protection of civilians tomorrow.

2.
METHODOLOGY

In April-June 2026, the Charitable Organization "Relief Coordination Centre" conducted a comprehensive study using a mixed-methods approach to assess security risks, urgent needs, and support priorities for volunteers and humanitarian workers operating in Ukraine's frontline communities.
This assessment included a specialized survey of 72 charitable organizations

actively engaged in the humanitarian response within high-risk areas. While the data collection captured specific operational challenges at the community level, for the purposes of this report, the findings have been aggregated to provide a comprehensive analysis of humanitarian security at national and regional levels.

Demographics

The majority of the surveyed organizations operate across various oblasts (regions) of Ukraine, namely:

52	37	37	29	24	23	...
Kharkivska	Zaporizka	Dnipro-petrovska	Donetska	Sumska	Mykolaivska	others

The average number of personnel per organization is 92.

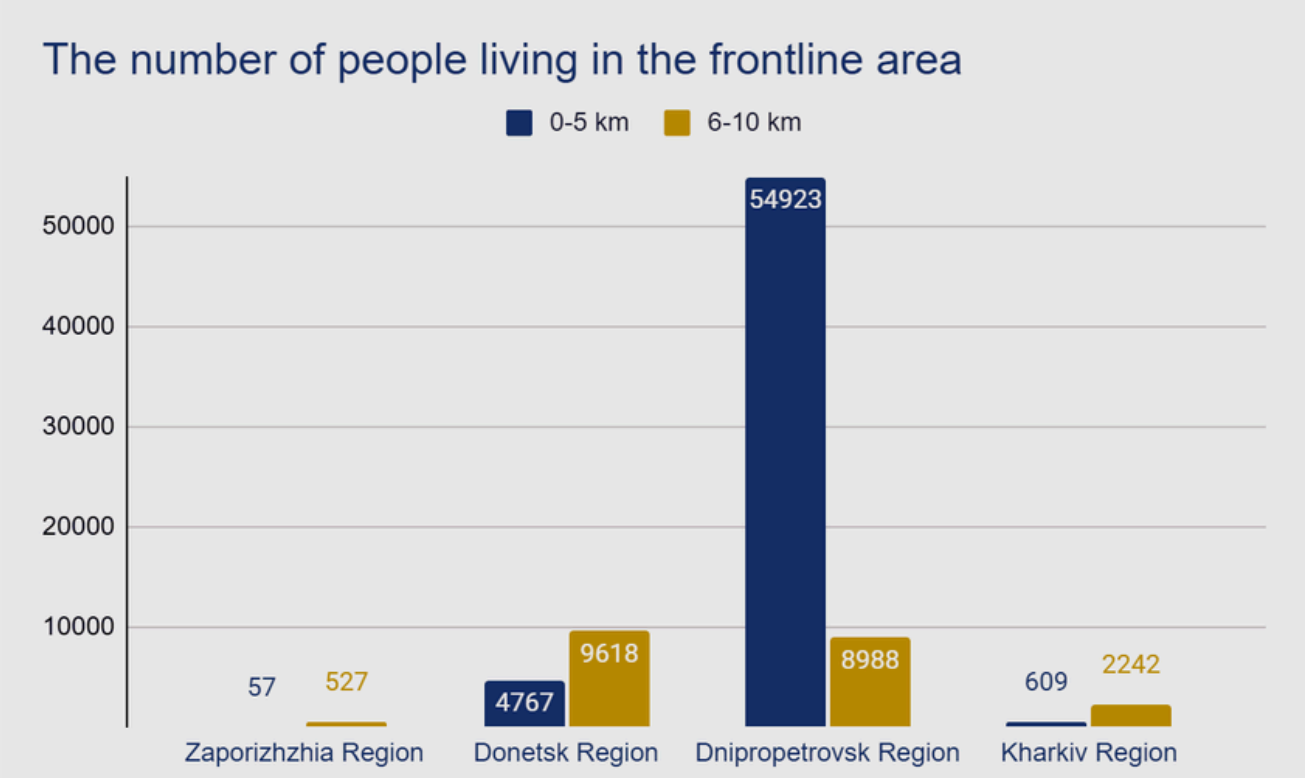
Analysis

Transformation of the Security Environment and New Risks for Humanitarian Missions

Starting from 2024, there has been a rapid surge in the role of unmanned systems in warfare. Drones are utilized not only for reconnaissance and artillery fire adjustment, but also for direct strikes on vehicles, humanitarian convoys, and civilian infrastructure facilities.

The proliferation of FPV drones, fiber-optic drones, and repeater drones has significantly expanded the capabilities for detecting and striking moving targets. This has substantially impacted the operations of humanitarian organizations, particularly those conducting civilian evacuations from frontline territories.

At the same time, approximately **81.8 thousand people** currently reside in the frontline zone (within a 0–10 km radius of the line of contact) across Donetsk, Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, and Zaporizhzhia oblasts.



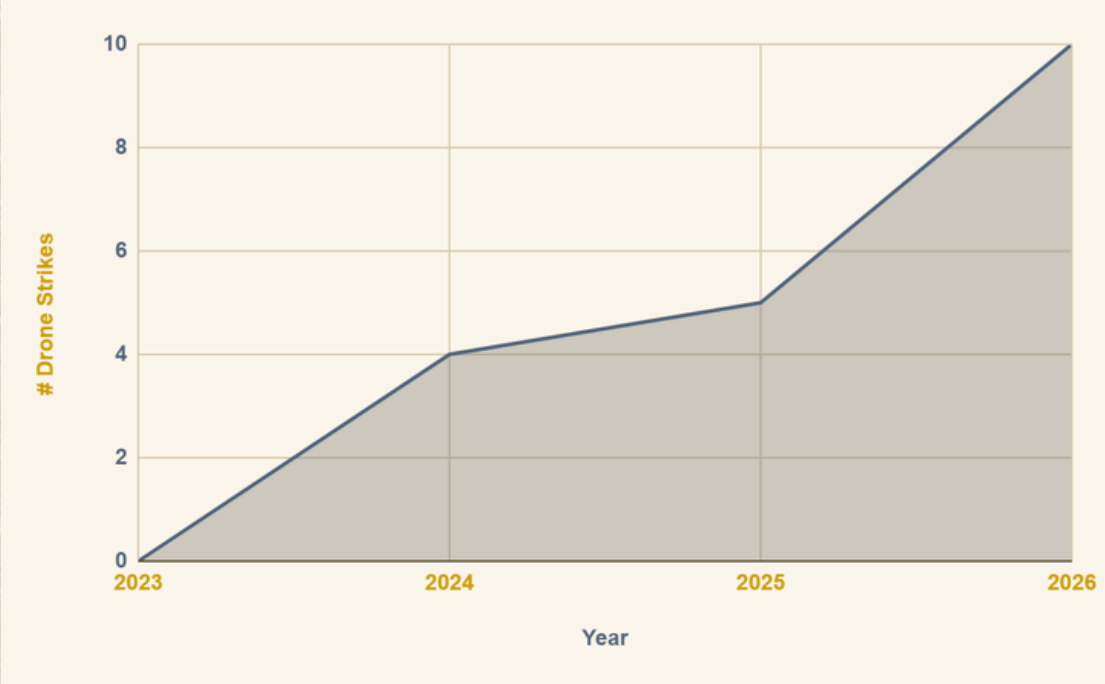
According to data from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2025 was the deadliest year for the civilian population since 2022. A total of 2,514 civilian deaths and over 12,000 injuries were documented.

A key driver behind the rise in casualties was the expanded use of unmanned systems and precision-guided weapons.

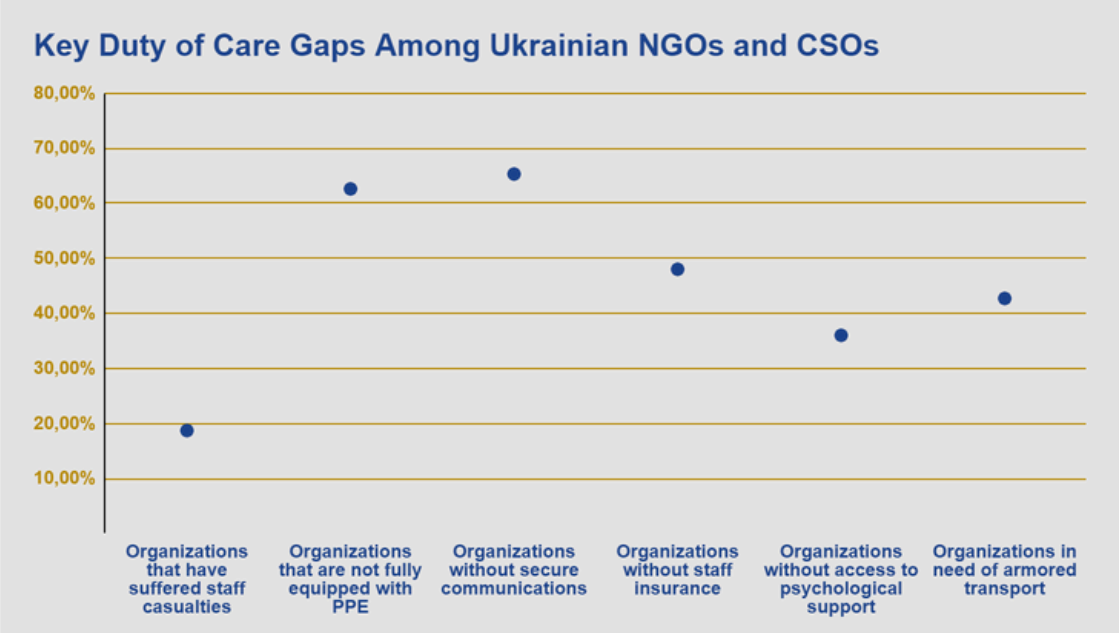
Concurrently, humanitarian workers themselves are increasingly becoming casualties of hostilities. According to OCHA data, in 2025 alone, over 230 incidents were recorded, resulting in impacted humanitarian access in Ukraine, and at least four humanitarian workers were killed in the line of duty.

1. 2025 deadliest year for civilians in Ukraine since 2022, UN human rights monitors find | UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine

For humanitarian organizations, this implies that even traditionally relatively safe routes no longer guarantee an adequate level of protection for personnel and beneficiaries. A total of 53% of strike incidents involving humanitarian missions in frontline territories were recorded in 2026. The upward trend in the number of drone attacks on humanitarian missions is presented in the chart below:



For Ukrainian evacuation organizations, the risks are even higher, as they operate in direct proximity to active combat areas and regularly conduct civilian evacuations from high-danger zones. Unlike many international humanitarian structures, local organizations often have limited resources to ensure a comprehensive security system for their personnel.



The situation is further complicated by the rapid evolution of unmanned technologies. According to data from the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission, in 2026, short-range unmanned systems became the leading cause of civilian deaths and injuries near the frontline, overtaking certain other types of weaponry in terms of casualties.



For humanitarian teams, this signifies a fundamental shift in the nature of risk. While previously the primary dangers stemmed from artillery shelling or missile strikes, today humanitarian transport can be detected and targeted in real time by reconnaissance and strike drones.

Humanitarian missions are forced to transition from a reactive security model to an early warning and risk management framework. While personal protective equipment, first aid kits, and route coordination used to be the main means of protection, the following have now become critically important:

- early threat detection systems for aerial hazards
- redundant communication channels
- continuous risk monitoring
- personnel training on protocols during drone attacks
- life and health insurance
- standardized incident response procedures

2. UN Human Rights Monitors Warn of Rising Civilian Casualties | UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine

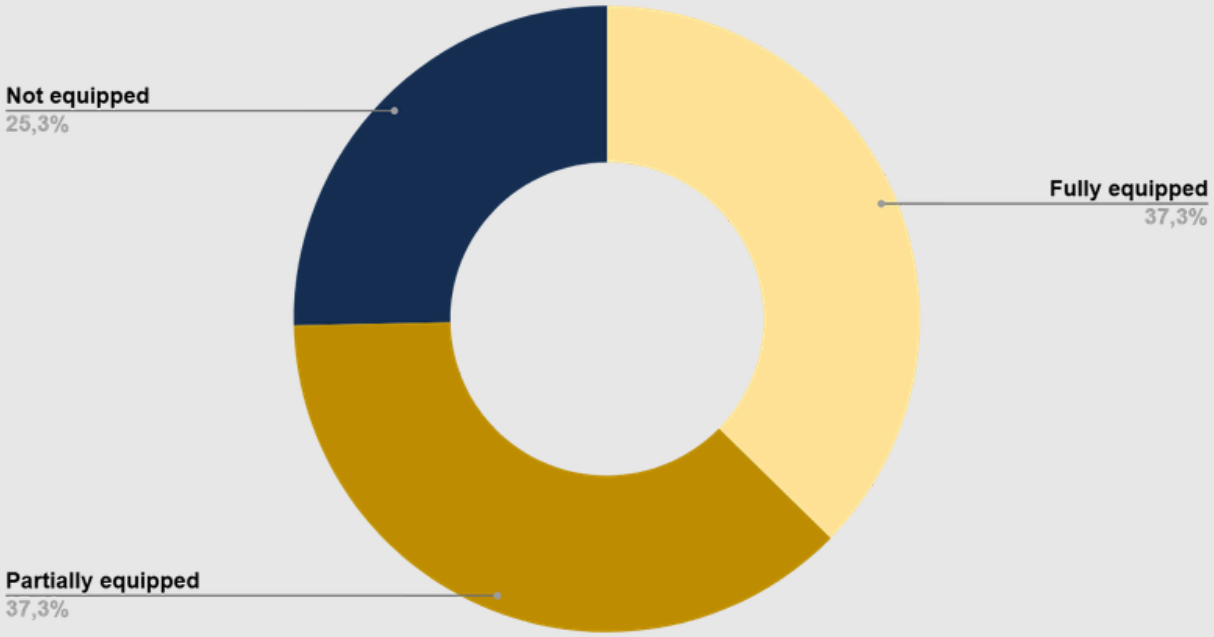
3. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and First Aid Kits

Every fourth organization deploys personnel to frontline areas without a complete set of protective gear or first aid kits.

According to survey data, there is a specific need to procure anatomical female body armor. The use of unadapted personal protective equipment can lead to chronic tissue trauma and increase the risk of developing medical conditions, including oncological diseases.

Procurement should focus on lightweight body armor with extended protection areas (covering the neck, groin, and shoulders) that feature a quick-release system and meet modern mobility requirements for personnel.

Additionally, there is a need to procure armored blankets (ballistic protective blankets) to provide auxiliary protection for personnel during evacuations and the execution of operational tasks.

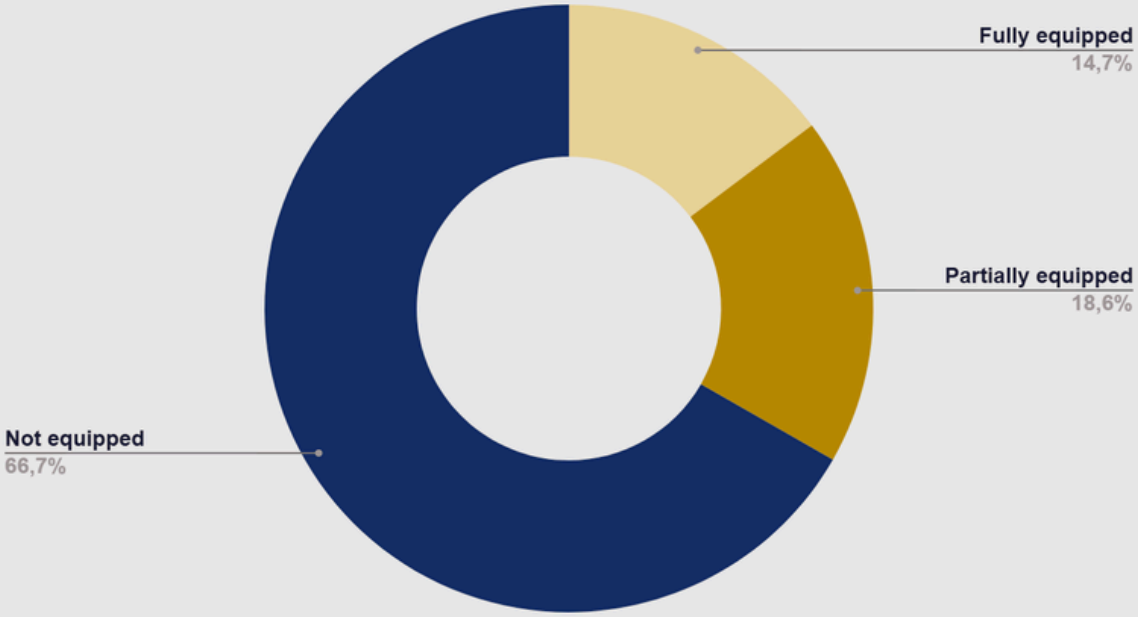


4. Secure Communications

The most critical challenge in this area is the widespread deficit of secure communications among field teams. Survey statistics reveal that only 14.7% of the respondent organizations are fully equipped with technical communication assets, while 18.6% have only partial coverage.

Concurrently, 66.7% of respondents completely lack the necessary equipment.

Effectively, 2 out of 3 organizations currently operate without secure communication channels under high-risk conditions and active electronic warfare. This creates a reality where, in the event of an emergency, crews find themselves in a complete information vacuum, unable to call for assistance.



The implementation of a comprehensive communication and monitoring system forms the foundation of proactive protection for humanitarian missions in high-risk zones. The technical security framework includes providing teams with SIM cards and redundant communication channels to counter EW (Electronic Warfare) interference, continuous GPS tracking of vehicles, and the use of personal trackers for personnel "on the ground."

«check-in/check-out» system



This process is coordinated via a strict "check-in/check-out" procedural protocol to monitor the arrival and return of missions. Automated alerts serve as an additional safeguard, instantly notifying the mission's coordination center of any loss of communication with the crew or deviations from the route.

The primary outcome of deploying this architecture is a radical reduction in the time required to locate and assist teams in the event of an incident. This ensures a swift response to emergencies and elevates the fulfillment of Duty of Care obligations for humanitarian personnel to a fundamentally higher level.

Vulnerability of Hostile Signal Detection Systems



Current models of hostile signal detectors (HSDs), which are widely used by volunteers and humanitarian staff, are losing their efficacy due to shifts in UAV operating frequencies.
The most common HSDs scan baseline ranges: 0.9–1.8 GHz, 2.87–4.08 GHz, and 4.86–6.06 GHz. Concurrently, the analysis of downed drones (specifically of the "Molniya" type) has revealed the utilization of 4.1–4.5 GHz frequencies for video transmission, while a shift in FPV drone control channels into the spectrum above 7 GHz is also being documented.

Consequently, drones operating on these frequencies remain completely "invisible" to standard analyzers, critically increasing the risk of humanitarian missions being targeted.

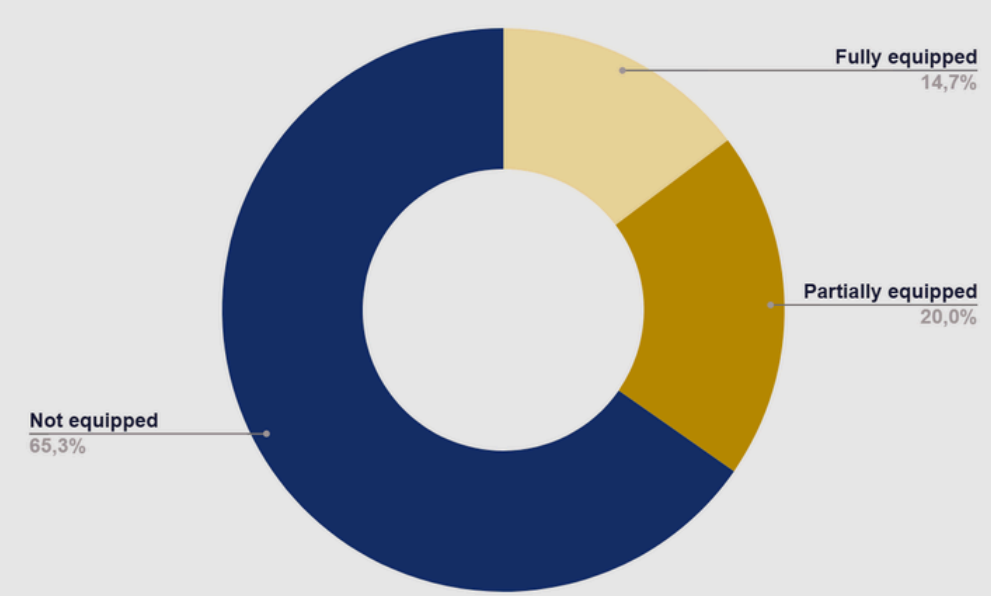


Due to the continuous shifting of frequencies, portable detectors remain effective for no longer than 6 months, after which they essentially become "expendable items." Meanwhile, the approval and procurement cycle for new modifications takes longer than the operational relevance of the devices themselves, causing the equipment to become obsolete before it even reaches humanitarian personnel.

Critical Procurement Needs:

Next-Generation Video Detectors: Transitioning to alternative devices capable of rapidly scanning a broader spectrum and adapting to non-standard frequencies.

External Antennas: Procuring signal-boosting antennas to improve communication, extend flight range, and increase the control stability of internal technical assets under EW (Electronic Warfare) conditions.



5. Insurance for Humanitarian Personnel

International practice views insurance as one of the fundamental components of Duty of Care. |

Depending on the level of risk, organizations provide coverage for:

- life;
- health;
- temporary disability (loss of capacity to work);
- permanent disability;
- medical evacuation (medevac);
- repatriation.

The availability of insurance coverage not only guarantees support for affected personnel and their families but also fosters a responsible approach to risk management.

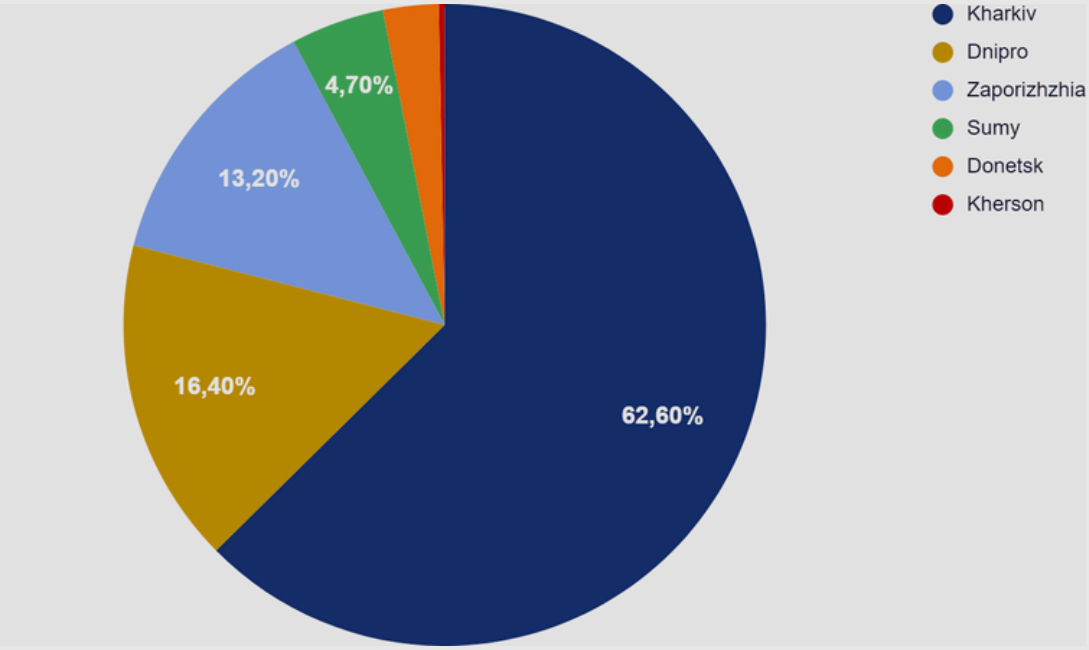
For the majority of Ukrainian humanitarian organizations, insuring personnel remains a challenge due to the high cost of insurance products and the limited number of programs that account for active wartime risks.

Only 52% of organizations have insurance for their staff in frontline areas; however, the available insurance packages do not cover all or some of the core needs, specifically:

- they do not cover the medical component
- they provide low payouts in the event of a fatality (approximately 300,000 UAH)
- they do not include support for the families of deceased volunteers or humanitarian workers

Throughout 2025–2026, a total of 3,900 volunteers from 163 organizations operating in Kharkiv, Sumy, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk, and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts were insured.

Geographical Distribution of Insured Volunteers:



6. Specialized Training

International humanitarian security standards mandate regular specialized training for personnel operating in high-risk environments.

This primarily includes HEAT (Hostile Environment Awareness Training), first aid training, risk management, protocols for actions during shelling and drone attacks, crisis response, and evacuation procedures.

For the majority of Ukrainian organizations, access to such programs remains limited due to their high cost and the scarcity of available training courses.
Consequently, a significant portion of personnel gain practical experience directly during humanitarian missions, which increases the margin for error and elevates the probability of injury.

The coverage level of traditional security training among the surveyed organizations is relatively high:

- First Aid - 91.9%
- Explosive Ordnance Risk Education (EORE) - 67.7%
- Psychological First Aid (PFA) - 56.4%

Despite solid foundational training, there is an acute deficit in knowledge regarding modern threat factors in the frontline zone. Organizations report an urgent need for training in the following areas:

- UAV/Drone Countermeasures and Protection - 50.7%
- Hostile Environment Awareness Training (HEAT) - 41.3%
- Tactical Medicine (TCCC / CLS) - between 37% and 49% (depending on the specific nature of the missions)

Systemic Issues with Existing Training Programs:

- **Cookie-Cutter Approaches:** The majority of courses available on the market duplicate the same theoretical mechanisms and outdated theories that fail to account for the realities of a dynamically changing security environment.
- **Lack of Practical Application:** Training programs are detached from the actual operational conditions that volunteers encounter in the field.

Priority Requirements for New Training Programs:

1. **Simulation-Based Training (Cross-Sectoral Approach):** It is essential to involve representatives from relevant state and security structures to simulate environments that are as close as possible to real-world field operations (e.g., shelling, navigating checkpoints, electronic warfare operations).
2. **Hybrid Delivery Format:** The optimal model involves utilizing the material-technical framework and infrastructure of state institutions combined with relevant, adapted content delivered by civilian experts and practitioners.
3. **Knowledge-Sharing Platforms:** Shifting from classical lecture formats to interactive sessions focused on the horizontal exchange of experience, case studies, and actual security protocols (Peer-to-Peer learning) between humanitarian organizations.

7. Psychological Support

A distinct challenge for the humanitarian sector is the significant psychological toll on personnel. Workers and volunteers regularly confront the aftermath of shellings, civilian casualties, severe trauma, the evacuation of low-mobility individuals, and operations under conditions of constant danger.



International experience shows that prolonged exposure to such environments can lead to occupational burnout, chronic stress, anxiety disorders, and post-traumatic reactions.

Despite this, systemic psychological support for personnel remains an underdeveloped component of the humanitarian response in Ukraine:

- **Access to an individual psychologist - 38.7%**
- **No access - 36%**
- **Retreats/recovery programs - only 26.7%**

More than a third of the organizations completely lack any systemic team recovery mechanism.

Need for Armored Vehicles for Evacuations and Humanitarian Missions



The total fleet of civilian vehicles currently utilized by the surveyed organizations stands at 131 units (with a combined capacity of 1,114 seats). However, the level of protection provided by these vehicles is critically low:

42.67% of the surveyed organizations (32 entities) stated an urgent need for armored vehicles to ensure safe operations in frontline areas, with the primary focus on the Donetsk direction.

Currently, **only 28 armored vehicles are operationally ready within the humanitarian sector** (22 vehicles held by specialized organizations and 6 additional pickups provided by our team). Meanwhile, the total number of organizations involved in evacuation processes at various stages stands at 129. This indicates a severe deficit of protected, specialized transport.

The main risk factors during missions stem from the specifics of the target demographics and the logistics along the Donetsk direction:



A significant portion of civilians (the elderly, the critically ill, and individuals with limited mobility) remain in active combat zones until the very last moment. Their evacuation requires more time during loading within the target zone.



Road conditions in frontline areas are completely unsatisfactory or destroyed, making it impossible to use standard civilian or medical transport.

There is an urgent priority to procure not just standard protected transport, but high-mobility armored vehicles (4x4) specifically converted or adapted for the safe transportation of low-mobility individuals (equipped with spaces for stretchers, wheelchair tie-downs, or lifting mechanisms).

CONCLUSION

The results of the study conducted by the Charitable Organization "Relief Coordination Centre" indicate the emergence of an aggressive risk architecture for the humanitarian sector in Ukraine over the 2024–2026 period.

The scaling of unmanned systems has fundamentally altered the nature of threats: mission movements are now tracked and attacked in real time. This requires organizations to make an immediate transition from passive defense to proactive risk management and early warning systems.

A critical challenge is the widespread deficit of secure communications among field teams: only 14.7% of the surveyed organizations are fully equipped with communication assets, 20% are partially equipped, and 65.3% completely lack them. Effectively, 2 out of 3 organizations operate under high-risk conditions and active EW (Electronic Warfare) without secure channels, which, in the event of an emergency, threatens total informational isolation and the inability to call for assistance.

The foundation of proactive mission protection lies in the implementation of a comprehensive communication and monitoring system. It includes redundant communication channels, GPS tracking of vehicles and personnel, as well as a "check-in/check-out" procedural protocol. Automated alerts enable the coordination center to instantly detect any loss of communication or deviations from the route.

The deployment of this architecture radically reduces search and rescue times in the event of an incident, ensuring a swift response and a qualitatively new level of fulfilling Duty of Care obligations.

The primary point of vulnerability is the technological obsolescence of technical assets.
Due to the constant shifting of UAV operating frequencies into non-standard ranges (4.1–4.5 GHz and above 7 GHz), the detectors currently used by volunteers have lost their efficacy, turning into expendable items with a life cycle of under 6 months. This situation is exacerbated by a profound deficit of protected transport: for 129 organizations involved in evacuations, there are only 28 armored vehicles available. Given that saving low-mobility groups near the front line requires significant time in the impact zone amid destroyed infrastructure, the procurement of 4x4 high-mobility armored vehicles is a critical priority.

The study also revealed serious gaps in the implementation of the Duty of Care concept. Nearly half of the surveyed organizations (48%) lack insurance coverage for deployments to frontline areas, while available commercial packages do not cover the treatment of war-related injuries and feature low payout limits. Furthermore, every fourth mission faces a shortage of basic PPE or first aid kits, and existing equipment requires modernization (specifically, there is an acute demand for lightweight anatomical female body armor with extended protection).

Finally, new realities necessitate a reshaping of training and psychological support. Despite the high level of foundational training among personnel (medicine, mine safety), existing training courses are overly theoretical. More than half of the respondents require practical training in UAV countermeasures and HEAT. The new training model must be built on cross-sectoral cooperation-utilizing the infrastructure of state institutions combined with up-to-date content from civilian experts to create simulated field conditions. Meanwhile, the colossal workload leads to burnout, while more than a third of teams are completely deprived of psychological assistance or decompression programs.

Overcoming these challenges requires systemic donor support. Funding for humanitarian missions in Ukraine must mandatorily include targeted investments in high-tech detection systems, specialized armored transport, adequate war risk insurance, simulation-based training, and the psychological rehabilitation of teams.

MORE INFORMATION CAN BE FOUND ON OUR WEBSITE AT THE FOLLOWING LINK OR BY SCANNING THE QR CODE

BRIDGE is a comprehensive analytical system, that brings together dashboards covering key areas of humanitarian response: evacuation, population needs, requests, and their fulfillment. It allows for real-time tracking of trends, the structure of aid, and the effectiveness of the response.

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