



# Hope Amid Turmoil:

## SISTERS IN CONFLICT AREAS



# GLOBAL SISTERS REPORT

GSR: A PROJECT OF NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER



# HOPE AMID TURMOIL: Sisters in Conflict Areas

It is with mixed feelings that we present our latest e-book, “Hope Amid Turmoil: Sisters in Conflict Areas.” Please don’t misunderstand. The stories and columns are excellent. The stories by journalists include detailed, compelling reporting with needed context and artful writing. The columns are poignant reflections by Catholic sisters who are amazingly courageous, serving people affected by terrible conflicts not of their making. Yet it is sad to realize that our world is so riven by turmoil, war and gang violence.

This was by far the most ambitious and challenging project that we have undertaken at Global Sisters Report in our nearly 10-year history. We are a very small staff and lack the resources of larger media organizations. Still, when we met in December 2022 to decide what to focus on as our major project for 2023, there was no doubt that this issue dominated all the others: How Catholic sisters were serving, or trying to serve, people in areas suffering from invading armies, armed gangs or both.

We sent international correspondent and freelance photojournalist Gregg Brekke to Ukraine to report on efforts by sisters to help those affected by the invasion by Russia and their own reactions to their homeland being so brutally ravaged. We also reached out to sisters in Ukraine to write a series of columns about their experiences and insights. We published the first story in the series, and the first of several columns by sisters in Ukraine, on Feb. 23, 2023, the eve of the one-year anniversary of Russia’s assault. We also focused several stories on efforts by sisters to help foster peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka, Sierra Leone, Colombia and Croatia — countries once beset by war, strife and terrorism but now seeking to live peacefully.

Selecting just some of the 40 stories and columns in the series to include in this eBook was really challenging as they were all so well done. We invite you to read the rest of the series at this link: [GlobalSistersReport.org/Hope](https://www.globalsistersreport.org/Hope). We present this e-book as a testimony to the courage and efforts of these sisters and all who minister to those in great need, who provide hope amid turmoil.



Gail DeGeorge

Editor

Global Sisters Report



**VIEW THE FULL SERIES HERE:**

👉 <https://www.globalsistersreport.org/gsr-series/hope>

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Sr. Lydia Timkova of the Dominican Sisters of Blessed Imelda teaches a catechism class in Mukachevo, Ukraine, in February. Her students include new arrivals from other parts of Ukraine displaced during the war. The Dominican sisters are originally from neighboring Slovakia but have long experience in Mukachevo. Since the war's beginning, Timkova has traveled to eastern Ukraine at least three times to deliver humanitarian aid to areas hardest hit by the war. (Gregg Brekke)

## In spite of a year of war, Ukrainians endure and religious ministry continues



by

**CHRIS HERLINGER**

**IRPIN, UKRAINE** — February 23, 2023

On a February afternoon of welcome blue skies and bright sunlight, brothers Basil and Nicolai Knutarev surveyed the scorched apartment complexes in Irpin, Ukraine, where they once lived.

The apartments have remained untouched since a brutal three-week Russian siege and bombardment that ended March 28, 2022, more than a month following the start of Russia's Feb. 24 invasion of Ukraine. With their blackened, charred exteriors, the buildings evoke danger and menace, underscored by the distinct smell of leaking gas wafting in the cold air.

The siege resulted in nearly 300 civilian deaths, making Irpin, a once-tranquil community about 15 miles west of the capital of Kyiv, nearly as infamous as neighboring Bucha, the better-known site of alleged Russian war crimes.

Irpin's pre-war population of 70,000 dwindled after the siege. Most residents have since returned, though some, like the Knutarev brothers, remain displaced.

Nicolai, 76, a retired factory worker, now lives in a nearby town with other relatives but occasionally comes by Irpin to check on things, including picking up potatoes in a rented garage that serves as a temporary storage cooler.

Basil, who also relocated nearby, looked up at the hulk of his vacant apartment building and shrugged.

“No progress,” Basil, 71, a security guard and retired factory worker, said of his destroyed sixth-floor apartment, despite promises of reconstruction from local officials. “No one knows the future.” His voice trailed off. “Just promises. We lost everything.”

“We lost everything”: It’s a sentiment shared by millions of Ukrainians uprooted and displaced during a year of a war condemned by much of the world that has transformed the face of Europe, increased international tensions and caused ripples in the global economy.

“Life has changed not just for Ukraine, but the whole world,” said Sr. Yanuariya Isyk, a member of the Sisters of the Order of St. Basil the Great whose ministry is based in Kyiv. “We’re living a new life now. It can’t be the same as it was before the war. Life will never be the same again.”

The new reality is one of displacement and confusion, loss and death. Hospitals, schools and neighborhoods have been targeted in particularly brutal acts that have outraged the world. The United Nations says more than 7,000 civilians,



Basil Knutarev stands in front of his apartment building in Irpin, Ukraine, that was destroyed by Russian artillery in the early days of the invasion. All the residents had evacuated and nobody was injured in the shelling. (Gregg Brekke)

including more than 400 children, have died because of the war, and more than 11,700 have been injured.

Even in locales far from the front, life is always on edge, with blackouts and electrical outages — Russia has targeted the country’s power grid — and air-raid sirens interrupting an afternoon idyll.

Yet Ukrainians also speak of renewed unity, solidarity and hope. In a country that has become one big conflict zone, the war has galvanized religious communities to open their doors to those who have been displaced and to lead various humanitarian missions.

“We’ve had to think less of ourselves and more about everybody else,” Isyk said in an interview in the small apartment monastery she shares with two other sisters in a building damaged when Russian saboteurs engaged with Ukrainian forces early in the war.

Though her work in Christian education in Kyiv remains paramount, Isyk has coordinated deliveries of food — flour, pasta, canned fish and meat, rice, and milk — and medical supplies to those in need.

In May, Isyk and other volunteers visited Bucha to meet with residents and pray at the mass grave of slain civilians. It was a hazy, cloud-filled day, and residents were silent as Isyk and others unloaded the food and other supplies. Then the tears came as people recounted their experiences.

“They told us how they survived and were grateful they could speak to someone about that,” she said. “It was important to hear their stories, to ease their pain and to comfort them.”

Such comfort is a needed balm. Catholic religious feel the promise of and hope for eventual victory, of resurrection, but that is still not visible.

“For us, 2022 was a year of deep darkness and crucifixion for the Ukrainian people,” Isyk said. “Thousands of Ukrainian hearts were crucified, people’s destinies were mutilated, cities



Buildings in areas around Kyiv, Ukraine, including Irpin, Bucha and Borodyanka, show damage from the yearlong war with Russia. (Gregg Brekke)



Anti-tank barriers sit on the street corners near the Roman Catholic cathedral in Kyiv, Ukraine. (Gregg Brekke)



Scaffolding protects a monument in the center of Lviv, Ukraine. (Gregg Brekke)



The center of this apartment complex in Borodyanka, Ukraine, collapsed when a Russian missile hit it on April 5, 2022. (Gregg Brekke)

and villages were destroyed.”

“Ukraine and the Ukrainian people have experienced a long, difficult and painful year of Lent. Every Ukrainian has suffered during this year one way or another,” said Sr. Anna Andrusiv, another member of the Sisters of the Order of St. Basil the Great who lives in the western city of Lviv. She and her Basilian sisters offered shelter in the early months of the war to those on their way to nearby Poland. But with fewer people now headed to Poland, the sisters have not hosted arrivals since September.

There is no sign that the war will end soon. And earlier this month, people spoke of bracing for the worst, with many fearing a new Russian onslaught from the north, possibly from Belarus, a Russia ally.

“Right now, things are stable, but everything is still on the table,” Dominican Fr. Mikhailo Romaniv said of the situation in Fastiv, a community of 45,000 about 45 miles southwest of Kyiv. Romaniv is in charge of the Christian Center of St. Martin de Porres, a Dominican ministry that provides assistance to mothers and children with various needs in addition to those who have been displaced or are experiencing homelessness.

Whatever stability Fastiv has is welcome to Dasha Habovska, 24, and her 1-year-old son, Christian, who are living in a converted hospital on the city’s outskirts as part of the Dominican ministry. In early February, the residence housed seven families — 18 people in all.



Sandbags protect the basement of the Greek Catholic cathedral in Lviv, Ukraine, that serves as a bomb shelter for local residents. (Gregg Brekke)



Sr. Yanuariya Isyk pays her respects at a mass grave of civilian victims of alleged Russian war crimes in Bucha, Ukraine, during a May 2022 visit. (Courtesy of Yanuariya Isyk)



Dasha Habovska and her son, Christian, now live in Fastiv, Ukraine, after the Russian invasion and bombardment their home in Kherson. (Gregg Brekke)



Sr. Damiana Monica Miac of the Dominican Sisters of Jesus and Mary works with the children of people who have been displaced in Fastiv, Ukraine. (Gregg Brekke)

Habovska and her son fled the then-occupied city of Kherson in September, leaving behind Habovska's partner and Christian's father, Daniel, who is now serving in defense work along the Ukraine-Belarus border.

In some ways, the decision to leave was easy because the family's home was near an area of bombardment. But the separation has been difficult.

"It's hard for Christian, being away from his father," Habovska said, adding it is challenging to raise an infant alone in a new environment. But Habovska said she feels safe and is grateful for the assistance, care and housing she and her son receive.

"They are providing so much help, and help that you cannot find on any corner," she said.

Still, there are the constant worries — about family back in Kherson, about Daniel, about the course of the war.

Like nearly all Ukrainians, Habovska is confident of the war's ultimate outcome — "Of course, we will win," she said — but she can't be sure how the war's next phase will turn.

"We're prepared for everything," she said. "It's so disturbing."

And yet even amid such uncertainty, ministries continue.

Sr. Damiana Monica Miac, a Polish sister and one of five Dominican Sisters of Jesus and Mary who live and work in Fastiv, said a kind of routine has returned to the life of the school where she teaches kindergarten.

Miac, 53, has lived in Ukraine for 30 years, 24 of them in Fastiv. She recalls the early months of the war, with Russian troops nearby, as nerve-racking and trying. There was little food, and life felt like it was under siege.

"It was a hard time for everyone," she said. "At first, I couldn't pray at all."

She eventually found solace and strength in her community and her teaching. There are 35 kindergarten students at her school now, about half of them from permanent Fastiv residents

and the rest from displaced families.

And Miac's prayer life eventually returned and even deepened.

"The rosary," she said. "That helped."

Miac has come to trust further in God and said she thinks Ukraine will ultimately prevail.

"I believe everything will be all right," she said.

Even amid such optimism and signs of reconstruction in damaged areas like Bucha, the hurdles ahead are enormous, with the need for physical, cultural and spiritual repair.

"Ukraine has been damaged, and that is reflected in so many ways — schools destroyed, our heritage harmed," Isyk said. "It will take many years to rebuild and heal this society."

Those who have been displaced "have a wish to return home this spring," said Edith Dominika Shabej, a Hungarian Dominican associate and coordinator with Caritas who works with Dominican sisters in western Ukraine and eastern Slovakia. "But the problem is their homes have been destroyed. They have no place to return to."

In many parts of Ukraine, she said, land mines left by Russian forces also pose a deadly threat.

As the human toll of the war climbs — with estimates of military casualties on both sides in the hundreds of thousands — Ukrainian military families need help and solace, as do returning war veterans.

Another problem: the rise in alcohol abuse as families separate, particularly as women have migrated to other countries and men who have not been conscripted try to find meaning in their lives.

"They don't know what to do," Romaniv said of the men now living on their own. "They drink. And without the women with them, they lose the motivation to work."

Yet despite the extent of societal damage, the religious are adamant that Ukraine should not compromise with Russia to end the war.



“That would be a compromise with evil,” said Dominican Fr. Petro Balog, who heads the Institute of Religious Sciences of St. Thomas Aquinas in Kyiv. “It’s not Christian to compromise with evil.”

Balog said Ukraine’s Calvary began with the February 2014 annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas region that began a few months later.

For Ukrainians, he said, resurrection will be marked “when death is defeated, and the threat of death will linger as long as Putin’s imperial and [Soviet-like] Russia exists.”

“Our task is not an agreement with death, not a compromise,” Balog said, “but to overcome it, and that is final. I think with God’s help, it is possible.”

In Lviv, where the signs of war are less visible than they are in the towns around Kyiv, that sense of commitment is no less deeply felt.

“The thing people don’t understand is that Putin and Russia will not give us a real peace,” Andrusiv said. “If they give us two years, they will come back and kill. That will not be a real peace. ... We know there are good people in Russia who want peace. But they aren’t in the majority.”

Ukraine is fighting a battle against tyranny in a war that has implications far beyond the borders of Ukraine, Andrusiv said. “Our people are dying to protect the world.”

As Isyk walked through her apartment building, she pointed out a partially shattered stairwell window with a still-visible bullet hole. She said she could forgive Russia — “maybe not now, but in the future, yes. But the war will have to end, the suffering will have to end. We’re waiting for them to admit this mistake, and only then will we forgive them.”

She said the country needs to remain steadfast.

“There will be a victory of life over death, good over evil, a celebration of victory over death, a celebration of hope and salvation, a celebration of good news after the dark night,” Isyk said.

“By God’s grace, Ukraine will be resurrected.”

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**Chris Herlinger** is international correspondent to Global Sisters Report and also writes on humanitarian and international issues for NCR. He has reported from South Sudan and Darfur, Sudan, as well as numerous other locales, including Haiti, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Israel and the Occupied Territories, Kenya and Ethiopia and Liberia. He is the co-author, with Paul Jeffrey, of books on Haiti and Darfur, published by Seabury, and a third, on global hunger, published in 2015.



In Kyiv, Sr. Yanuariya Isyk and volunteers load food and medical supplies bound for Bucha, Ukraine, on a van in Kyiv in May. (Courtesy of Yanuariya Isyk)



Basilian Sr. Anna Andrusiv in Lviv, Ukraine (Gregg Brekke)



Dominican Fr. Petro Balog, who heads the Institute of Religious Sciences of St. Thomas Aquinas in Kyiv, Ukraine (Gregg Brekke)



Basil and Nicolai Knutarev stand in front of Basil’s apartment building in Irpin, Ukraine, which was destroyed by Russian artillery in the early days of the invasion. Nicolai’s apartment across the parking lot was also destroyed. (Gregg Brekke)



Croatian youth pray for Ukraine, in Belisce, Croatia, Feb. 25, 2022. (Courtesy of the Sisters of the Order of St Basil the Great)

## COLUMN

# God, don't let us unlearn being human



by

**TEODOZIJA  
MYROSLAVA  
MOSTEPANIUK**

**CROATIA** — March 1, 2023

I look at the walls of the small kitchen of our monastery (straight lines, stone flowers) and think about how deeply we humans have a longing for harmony and order. As religious sisters, we are used to the fact that from time to time we must change our place of residence or ministry. However, I am sure that the childhood memories still live in each of us: the smells and sounds of the house where we were born and grew up, the bends of the streets of our native village or town, our childhood photos on which the first features of our future adult personality can be seen through amusing faces and disheveled hairstyles.

During this year of Russia's full-scale military aggression in Ukraine, about 40 million Ukrainians were deprived of all these things. For most Ukrainians, their native home has ceased to be a place of security. On 603,700 square kilometers of the territory of Ukraine (which is twice the size of Italy and slightly smaller than the state of Texas), air raid sirens still sound and super-heavy missiles designed to destroy military targets fall on residential buildings.

The funerals of someone's sons and husbands, sisters and mothers take place daily. Those of us who have unexpectedly lost a beloved one or a parent in early childhood can testify to how much it

affects our whole life. The deaths of a soldier or a civilian are not just numbers in statistical reports; each of those people was someone's closest person, someone's whole world, a guiding star that has gone out forever.

Sr. Vasyliia Sivch, who was, like me, a Sister of the Order of St. Basil the Great, wrote in her memoirs about the Second World War: "Every war is terrible, and the postwar consequences are even more terrible. Whoever experienced them experienced hell on earth. Because everyone was left with deep, painful wounds on the body and in the heart and soul, irreparable losses of dear people and property, acquired by hard work and thrift."

These words sound incredibly relevant even today.

While writing this text, I realized that my previous column for Global Sisters Report was written as early as Feb. 22, 2022, two days before the start of full-scale war. So much happened this year.

At the end of February 2022, the first refugees arrived in the city in eastern Croatia where I lived. I suddenly realized how fragile a human person is, how much he or she needs, and how we do not notice this in our daily life.

Among the refugees, I met a woman with cancer who could not stop chemotherapy; a young girl who needed weekly dialysis; a newborn boy who made his first journey with his mother, who had no opportunity to recover after giving birth. All of them needed not just food, clothes, housing, but very specific medical care, stable conditions, on which their lives literally depended.

If you multiply this by the number of 8 million refugees and displaced persons, you can roughly imagine the scale of the vulnerability caused by Russia's attack on Ukraine.

Soon Ukrainian soldiers who needed eye surgery came to Croatia for treatment. I looked at the burned face of a man who had lost his sight; his hands, also burned, were trembling. With his fragile human body, he stood against the aggressor's weapon to protect us.

We are vulnerable, we are mortal — this is my first lesson this year.

The most difficult thing for those Ukrainians who lived abroad at the time of the start of a full-scale war was the feeling of helplessness, the feeling of guilt due to the inability to protect their relatives who remained in Ukraine. A great support for us was the helping hands of foreign friends who collected aid, accepted refugees, and were simply interested, listened, supported and assured us that they believed in the victory of Ukraine.

A young guy at a printing service who printed my document for free after seeing the Ukrainian flag on it, an old gentleman at a language course who greeted me with "Glory to Ukraine,"

a library worker who asks me about Ukraine every time we meet — these simple touching gestures were a testimony of humanity and at the same time God's touch. The cracks of fragility in our "clay jars" (2 Corinthians 4:7) made the light of kindness more visible.

The second lesson I learned from this year is that Ukraine, my motherland, is a source of strength for me. Ukrainians who, fleeing the war, found their refuge in Croatia also contributed to this.

The most memorable for me was the question that constantly sounded from the lips of children and adults: "Do you miss Ukraine? Don't you want to return home?" Or as a 4-year-old girl said in her child manner: "Are you Ukrainian or 'Croatinian'?"

This was a lesson for me — to allow myself this longing for home, to trust my longing. Each of us has this yearning for a true "home," for a place where we are accepted, where we can be ourselves.

In August 2022, I had an opportunity to visit Ukraine. And I felt that my homeland, although wounded, was bringing me back to life. The first air raid siren I heard was during the liturgy, when we prayed the creed ("I believe").



The first book I was able to read since Feb. 24, 2022, was poetry. (Courtesy of the Sisters of the Order of St Basil the Great)

‘God of the kind and quiet, sad and wounded, don’t let me unlearn crying.’

— *Ukrainian poet Bohdana Matiyash*

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And now, when hard moments come, I listen to Ukrainian music and podcasts of Ukrainian psychologists, I read poetry and essays of modern Ukrainian authors.

At the same time, whoever I choose — the brilliant poet Vasyl Stus or the composer Volodymyr Ivasiuk — it turned out that the life of each of them was violently cut short in the war of Russia against Ukraine, which has lasted not only from 2022, nor from 2014, but for several centuries of persecutions, mass deportations and famines.

The third lesson was a spiritual experience. I think that this year brought to both believers and nonbelievers the acute questions about God, about life and death, good and evil, violence and justice.

A priest — to whom I confided that since Feb. 24, 2022, I have felt some obstacles in prayer — advised me to pay attention to how God is working in people during this war. In the courage of Ukrainian soldiers, firefighters, doctors who, risking themselves, fight for human lives every day, we can see a sign of Christ’s love, “lay down his life for the sake of his friends” (John 15:13).

However, at the sight of huge injustice, destroyed cities and crippled lives, the question “Why?” inevitably arises. Why is this happening?

The questions remain, they hurt, and sometimes we try to stop feeling and become petrified. The first book I was able to read after Feb. 24 was a collection of poems by the Ukrainian poet Bohdana Matiyash. I read the lines, “God of the kind and quiet, sad and wounded, don’t let me unlearn crying,” and I cried, for the first time in several months.

... While I am writing these lines, at 10:30 a.m. air raid sirens sound in the entire territory of Ukraine, because in Belarus a plane capable of carrying Kinzhal hypervelocity missiles took off. In those minutes, millions of children left their classrooms or kindergarten playrooms to go down to the basements of shelters. I can imagine how parents feel when they, while going to work in the morning, take their children to school.

My favorite Ukrainian poet and filmmaker, Iryna Tsilyk, whose husband, also a writer, has been in the war for a year, said: “To be honest, I sometimes feel like I carry a big black hole inside me, but fortunately, under the clothes, the smile, and all this things, it is not very noticeable.”

While the war is still going on, it is important to stay alive, not to succumb to the temptation of an easy and false peace, to the soothing whisper that “things are not so clear.” To remain human, we need to be open to the pain of others and our own. As Oleksandra Matviichuk, head of the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Center for Civil Liberties, aptly put it, “You don’t have to be Ukrainian to support Ukraine. It is enough just to be human.”

“God of the kind and quiet, sad and wounded, don’t let us unlearn crying.” God, don’t let us unlearn being human.

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**Teodozija Myroslava Mostepaniuk** is a sister of the Order of St. Basil the Great (Province of St. Michael the Archangel, Croatia). She completed a master’s degree in Ukrainian and English language at Kyiv National University in Ukraine and a master’s degree in religious pedagogy and catechetics at Catholic Faculty of Theology at Zagreb University in Croatia.

After final vows in 2018, she worked in parish ministry in Eastern Catholic parishes in Prniavor (Bosnia) and Kyiv (Ukraine). Currently, she is doing her licentiate studies in church history and teaching religious education in secondary school in Osijek, Croatia.



Sr. Scholasticah Nganda is pictured with two staff members of the Good Shepherd Peace Centre-Kit, a few miles south of Juba, in South Sudan. Nganda writes about how she and her colleagues try to keep hope alive in a country in turmoil and conflict. (Courtesy of Scholasticah Nganda)

## COLUMN

# What is it like serving in conflict-torn South Sudan?



by

**SCHOLASTICAH  
NGANDA**

**SOUTH SUDAN** — March 21, 2023

When did you last pause and reflect on your life in community and in ministry, in unfamiliar circumstances? What if you were invited to choose between your comfort zone and other zones that stress and stretch your capacities? What if you had to reimagine possibilities for thousands of people living on the periphery, marginalized by inherent systemic injustices, exploitation, violence and natural disasters?

I am ministering in South Sudan, a country in turmoil and conflict. I invite you to stretch your imagination and visualize yourself as a messenger of hope in the midst of turmoil. This reflection shares how my community and colleagues and I try to keep hope alive in circumstances of utter helplessness and vulnerability.

When I volunteered for the Solidarity with South Sudan Mission, an initiative of the Union of International Superiors General (or UISG) and Union of Superiors General (or USG), I barely knew the depth of trauma that existed in South Sudan. I was not aware that tens of thousands of South Sudanese had been killed while millions of them are living in neighboring countries as refugees. Gaining independence for South Sudan in 2011 did not usher in political stability. Shocking and



Sr. Scholasticah Nganda is pictured with two staff members of the grounds of Good Shepherd Peace Centre-Kit. (Courtesy of Scholasticah Nganda)

paradoxical, isn't it?

Every day in South Sudan opens my eyes to the plight of women and children, who continue to pay a heavy price in the ensuing inter-tribal and ethnic conflict. While the men fight, thousands of women are left behind to carry the day-to-day yoke of fending for their families. Women are seen digging their farms and fetching water for their families while the men are fighting or away grazing huge herds of cattle. (A man who possesses many cattle is considered to be a rich man in South Sudan since cattle are used to pay bride price.)

Many families in South Sudan are headed by women since the men are absent. With absent husbands, most women live by their wits, tending small farms, minding their children and running small businesses — like selling fruits and vegetables or home-brewed alcohol — to generate income for their families.

You may find it easy to read about war, guns and bullets. You may have no difficulty visualizing troops headed for peacekeeping missions in Syria, Somalia or South Sudan. I have not found it easy to live imagining that a gun could be fired at me any time, day or night. Living in South Sudan, it is not uncommon to hear gunshots coming from all directions. In September 2022, rebel forces killed one of the seven security

men who guard the Good Shepherd Peace Centre-Kit, or GSPC,, where our Solidarity Pastoral Team members live. To this day, we do not know the reason for this attack! Worse still, efforts to seek justice for the family members of the murdered soldier have been met with crippling resistance.

Anytime I recall the brutal murder of our soldier Lipoy (not his real name), a cold shiver goes down my spine! Why did Lipoy have to die? What crime did he commit? On that fateful day, Lipoy stayed in the GSPC all day long. Unanswered conflict-related questions like these fill my mind as I minister in South Sudan. Likewise, some of my colleagues — both foreign and South Sudanese — struggle to find answers to similar questions. However, with fighting that often erupts with the least provocation among South Sudanese, maybe we are looking for answers to the wrong questions.

Talking to the women who participate in the Solidarity trauma healing workshops that Solidarity offers across the country, I have heard stories of women who live with the shame of gang rape or rape by a family member. Horrendous narratives, told by women and young girls forced by family to marry older men they did not know, have left me vicariously traumatized and in need of psychological support. Indeed, my lived experience since 2020 has been one of personal and professional challenge. Nevertheless, it has not all been bleak. There have been rewarding professional experiences in the moments of sadness.

Sometimes hope has been ignited in me and in those I serve. Moments of my attentive listening to people who need help have enabled the other person to become aware of their inner strengths — the power that helps in navigating challenging life situations. While it has given me fulfillment seeing others beam joyfully with revitalized hope, it saddens me to know I have no access to a formal debriefing place or a trained professional to support me in my work with traumatized people.

In vain, I have searched for a professional counselor for this support. I have found it challenging to work with traumatized people with no personal supervision of my own. I would not wish this experience for anyone! Now and then, I have accessed online supervision that proved helpful but very costly. Peer supervision is not an option as one finds oneself almost in a ministry all by him/herself. With almost no one with whom to discuss my work-related problems, I view this challenge as a dark cloud. I can only hope and wait for the sun to rise one day! In my own helplessness and vulnerability in my ministry in South Sudan, I have leaned on my faith in a loving and caring God. In God, my energy to serve has been affirmed and reinforced.

I do not expect for South Sudan to be flooded with professional psychologists working as supervisors, but I believe the psychology department in the University of Juba may train

some people as professional counselors, who would then offer this needed service.

As a missionary in South Sudan, I have learned to take in the pain of my people as they narrate their horrific stories, narratives that sometimes tore my heart. I have listened and heard women who have had to travel for days, hiding in bushes and surviving on grass and wild fruit as they made their way to what they imagined to be safe haven, either with relatives in distant villages or to church grounds. Keenly listening, I have heard details of how these people navigated their way through challenging and trying circumstances, and I have been left in awe by their resilience. Their survival in an environment enveloped by violence of untold magnitude tells of a people determined to beat all odds. Evidently, the majority of ordinary South Sudanese are determined to keep alive the independence dream of 2011, to move — as the pope said on Feb. 3 — “*from words to deeds.*”

Who would not want to partner with a people who aspire to self-liberation? The South Sudanese I have met and to whom I have ministered want to be actors in their own liberation. I too desire to play my role in this joined struggle for a future full of hope for South Sudan. The people of South Sudan have hope, an inspiration to work towards peace and a better future. They

dream of a better tomorrow, a transformed South Sudan that will once more focus on care of its people: education for the children, improved health care, functioning infrastructure and security for all.

Visualize such a country and you would find a reason to have physically or virtually celebrated with South Sudan as she welcomed Pope Francis, Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the symbolic head of the Anglican Communion, and the Rev. Iain Greenshields, the moderator of the Church of Scotland, on their recent “pilgrimage of peace” to South Sudan.

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**Scholasticah Nganda** is Kenyan by birth and a member of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy. In early ministry, she taught and held leadership positions at the secondary and university levels. Her graduate work was in counseling and counseling psychology. After serving on the leadership team of her congregation, she is now serving as the director of pastoral programs for Solidarity with South Sudan, Juba, and is one of four members of the Solidarity Pastoral Team working in collaboration with the Catholic Bishops Conference of South Sudan to meet the pastoral needs of the church there.



Sr. Scholasticah Nganda with religious of the Wsu Diocese in South Sudan (Courtesy of Scholasticah Nganda)



GSR's Chris Herlinger, in the center, walks near the center of an apartment complex in Borodyanka, Ukraine, which collapsed when it was hit by a Russian missile on April 5, 2022. (GSR photo/Gregg Brekke)

## Reporter's notebook from Ukraine: What life is like when war becomes normal



by GSR international  
correspondent

**CHRIS HERLINGER**

✉ [cherlinger@ncronline.org](mailto:cherlinger@ncronline.org)

### **MUKACHEVO, UKRAINE** — April 6, 2023

During my recent assignment to Ukraine, the war's relentless reach was evident even far from the front. While visiting Mukachevo, not far from the border with Slovakia, for example, my colleague Gregg Brekke and I heard air raid sirens for the first time.

While expected, they were still startling and cause for unease — as were poignant moments, like seeing young soldiers on railroad platforms, headed east to the front, saying goodbye to friends and family members. (I only saw male soldiers that afternoon but thousands of Ukrainian women are also serving at the front.)

Seeing the departing soldiers was a stark reminder of the costly, grave and tragic intrusion, even domination, of war on Ukrainian lives.

“Outside of Ukraine, the war is often portrayed as ‘Who’s winning, who’s losing,’ “ one Dominican sister in Mukachevo told me. “But what’s forgotten is the human cost.”

Some of that cost became quietly apparent near Mukachevo, in a visit to the nearby town of Serednje. There, a local priest with ties to Dominican sisters and to Caritas is overseeing a project to expand housing for a group of displaced orphans and adults from the Russian-occupied city of Mariupol.





Volodymyr Zavadski, an army chaplain and leader of a group formed to help fellow displaced persons — displacement that dates back earlier than 2022 to the initial incursion of Russia in Crimea and eastern Ukraine in 2014 (GSR photo/Gregg Brekke)



On a bitterly cold February afternoon, Dominican Sr. Edita Vozarova is seen during a visit to the nearby town of Serednje, where a project to expand housing for a group of displaced orphans and adults from the Russian-occupied city of Mariupol is under way. (GSR photo/Gregg Brekke)



Slovakian Dominican Sr. Edita Vozarova is pictured during an interview at her congregation's convent in Mukachevo, Ukraine. She and other members of the congregation, the Dominican Sisters of Blessed Imelda, hosted GSR journalists Chris Herlinger and Gregg Brekke in February. (GSR photo/Gregg Brekke)

Our time with this group — 22 children and nine adults, crowded into a small, darkened two-story house — was all too brief. But I sensed that the residents were deeply traumatized.

That was confirmed by Volodymyr Zavadski, an army chaplain and leader of the group who has formed a charity to help fellow displaced persons — displacement that dates back earlier than 2022 to the initial incursion of Russia in Crimea and eastern Ukraine in 2014. (Ukrainians make clear that, for them, the war began in 2014, not in February of last year, which is why they call the events of the last year “Russia’s full-scale invasion.”)

Recalling the utter confusion and daily bombardments that drove him and others to leave Mariupol, Zavadski spoke plainly and starkly: “I’m totally lost. I have lots of friends who died in the army at the hand of the Russians. I’ve seen orphans. I feel lost. And I feel big, big pain.”

Loss and displacement. Death and pain. Zavadski’s comments felt as bracing as the biting wind from the snow-covered steppes near Serednje — air so frigid in the darkening late afternoon that my eyes watered.

Zavadski’s sober observations helped frame the nearly 10 days we were in Ukraine — as did being in once-peaceful towns near the capital of Kyiv damaged and brutalized by Russian forces early in the war and only now recovering.

Thankfully, though, those were not the sole frames we experienced.

Stark reminders of war were nearly always offset, sometimes miraculously, by the resolve and solidarity, persistence and humanity, of those both suffering and those offering succor.

## Resistance and courage

In an environment where an invading country’s blunt, searing and often unspeakable violence is met with small acts of resistance and courage, the humility of sisters like Slovakian Sr. Edita Vozarova is both welcome and even healing.

Sister Edita and a translator, Natalia Kommodova, herself displaced first in 2014 and then in 2022, met Gregg and me in Kosice, Slovakia, and drove us into Ukraine. There we joined other members of the congregation, the Dominican Sisters of Blessed Imelda, who had kindly offered us to stay in their convent for a few nights.

Blessed with a wry sense of humor, and deep modesty — she put off an interview as long as she could — Sister Edita, 53, recalled that in the war’s first days she was not sure what to do to help the Ukrainians crossing into Slovakia. An early gesture, she said, was offering freshly baked cake to the

arrivals and making coffee for Order of Malta volunteers at the border.

“We didn’t know what else to do at first,” she said.

But in working with the volunteers as well as local parishes and Caritas, the sisters deepened their collaborations. As one example, she noted that ministries both in Mukachevo and across the border in Slovakia, like establishing kindergartens for displaced Ukrainian children, were made possible by the support of Dominican networks globally.

Other efforts: sending shoes and food to the front for Ukrainian soldiers; collecting clothing for the displaced, and offering refugees shelter for the first six months or so of the war. (Most of the families have since returned to Ukraine.)

“It has changed life in our community,” Sister Edita told me of the sisters’ lives at their convent in Kosice. “We are not used to children crying and laughing. But it gave us a lot of light and energy for our sisters.”

For her part, Natalia, who is from the now-besieged city of Bakhmut in the Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine, said her family’s “light and energy” come from the sisters. She, her children, ages 7 and 13, and her 83-year-old grandmother, also from Bakhmut, now live at the convent, while Natalia’s husband works for a hydropower generating company north of the capital of Kyiv.

“Cooperation with the sisters gave me strength at the moment when I felt the weakest in all 37 years of my life,” said Natalia, a journalist who assists the sisters with their humanitarian work.

“When I didn’t know if I was doing the right thing by staying in a foreign country, when it was difficult for me to survive the separation from my husband and my family, when my children were having a hard time being separated from their father,” she said, “the Dominican sisters took them for walks, played games together, allowing me to be alone and make important

decisions.”

Natalia said she constantly feels the sisters’ “prayers and support.”

In a recent email, Natalia said that in “the convent of the Dominican Sisters of Blessed Imelda in Kosice, my faith became real,” adding, “I don’t know how our destiny will develop, but I’m just learning to feel again and hear the voice of faith.”

Natalia and Sister Edita bid us farewell on the same railroad platform where we saw the departing troops. We didn’t know what to expect next in Lviv, a city with a culturally polyglot past — at times Jewish, Polish and now Ukrainian — and a stop for those headed west to Poland and other countries during the first months of the war.

Some sense of normalcy was visible in Lviv, long cherished as a charming, cobblestone-lined traveler’s destination. Despite the darkened streets at night, restaurants remained open, and a nightly curfew didn’t seem terribly well-enforced.

Yet idylls can be suddenly interrupted — and not only because of the constant hum of electrical generators heard on the city sidewalks. Turning a corner our first day, I ran into two Ukrainian soldiers brandishing Kalashnikov rifles.

The next day we saw a group of young — and I mean young — soldiers, none older than their mid-20s I would guess, grouping together in a city street. The same day we saw displays touting Ukrainian soldiers’ heroism outside one of Lviv’s handsome cathedrals — displays suggesting that the soldiers are blessed by saints.

In a nation experiencing war, though, there are always contradictions that complicate easy narratives. An interview one afternoon with a parish priest, a Franciscan sister and a lay Christian educator veered into uncomfortable territory on the issue of conscription.

The educator said that, from her Lviv parish, about two dozen young men have been conscripted. The sister and priest



Dominican Sr. Edita Vozarova and a translator, Natalia Kommodova, herself displaced first in 2014 and then in 2022, see Chris Herlinger and Gregg Brekke off on the train platform in Mukachevo, Ukraine. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)



Young soldiers gather in the center of Lviv, Ukraine. (GSR photo/Gregg Brekke)

spoke of small numbers of young men hiding to avoid military service, and the priest said he has presided over two funerals for those who have died in battle.

## Psychological stress

The toll this cumulative anxiety is taking on society is considerable. “The psychological stress is very big,” the sister said. While all are trying to avoid panic, she said, no one can predict with any certainty what the next months will bring — though there is still a widespread belief that, ultimately, Russian forces will be defeated.

Still, the question hanging over society is a constant thrum — “What’s next?”

That question took on more urgency as we got closer to the front. In Kyiv, the memories of a thwarted Russian takeover of the capital in the early days of the war remain raw.

Within days of the 2022 war’s start, Russian tanks had entered Kyiv — a shock to residents like Sr. Yanuariya Isyk, a member of the Sisters of the Order of St. Basil the Great whose ministry is based in the capital.

“I remember praying to God and asking, ‘How did they arrive so quickly in Kyiv?’” she recalled, speaking animatedly at the small monastery apartment shared with two other sisters.

Though the Russian forces were quickly repelled, it is not easy for Sister Yanuariya to forget having to seek shelter, along with hundreds of others, at an underground parking area for a day.

Ultimately, it became safe to return home — though there were still Russian saboteurs in her neighborhood, causing Ukrainian troops to fire at them. That left a mark on Sister Yanuariya’s apartment building, where a gaping bullet hole is still visible in a third-story stairwell.

At moments like that, Sister Yanuariya said, prayer — “living with faith,” “living to trust God” — proved to be both a source of comfort and a lodestar of resilience. “It was like a challenge for us, but I learned to trust in God, knowing God will help us,” she said. “He will do the best for us.”

Sister Yanuariya related her experiences over plates of homemade cookies and cups of steaming tea and coffee — simple hospitality that is the norm in Ukraine but speaks to a wider sense of generosity, kindness and even solidarity.

Something of that spirit is also apparent among those who are not avowedly religious.

The last third of our assignment — in and around Kyiv — could not have been accomplished without the help of Iryna Chernikova, 33, our translator, and her husband, Stas Nepokrytyi, 42, our driver. They are both Kyiv residents and are expecting their first child in about two months.

In the last year, the young couple have had to fully reorder their lives. Both lost livelihoods: Stas is an environmental attorney in a country where environmental law is not a priority now; Iryna is a furloughed flight attendant for the Ukrainian national airline. Because of the war, flights in and out of Kyiv are grounded.

Iryna and Stas spoke of their challenges over lunch at restaurant in Bucha — a city just west of of Kyiv best known for civilian atrocities committed by Russian troops last year. In Bucha we saw families reconstructing their homes — and, by inference, rebuilding their lives.



Sr. Yanuariya Isyk, a member of the Sisters of the Order of St. Basil the Great whose ministry is based in the capital of Kyiv, is pictured in the chapel of a small monastery apartment shared with two other sisters. (GSR photo/Gregg Brekke)



Translator Iryna Chernikova, center, and her husband, Stas Nepokrytyi, left, sit with Sr. Yanuariya Isyk, a member of the Sisters of the Order of St. Basil the Great whose ministry is based in the capital of Kyiv, here in the small monastery apartment shared with two other sisters. (GSR photo/Gregg Brekke)



Army recruitment billboards, like this one in Bucha, Ukraine, are ubiquitous throughout Ukraine. (GSR photo/Gregg Brekke)



Despite the tragedy of the massacre of civilians in Bucha, Ukraine, as well as the destruction of property, families are reconstructing their homes — and, by inference, rebuilding their lives. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)



An abandoned Russian tank just off a highway near the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

“Who knew Bucha would ever be famous?” Iryna said as we dug into bowls of hot bograch, a spicy Ukrainian soup. “It’s all very sad,” she said, sighing. “Life changes so fast.”

We pondered something several people had told us in interviews — that Ukraine is now a damaged society, both physically and socially. Overcoming that challenge touches both the collective and individual. “How do you rebuild a life?” Iryna mused.

She paused. “The war is showing us who is who. Most people become helpful,” she said, noting the solidarity shown by volunteers, and of neighbors helping neighbors. Some people even became heroic — joining the armed forces. “But others become thieves,” she said of people trying to profit from the war. Iryna paused and repeated herself. “The war is showing us who is who.”

The couple wants to be on the side of the angels — both volunteer with the Territorial Defense Forces, a kind of civilian national guard, and they are forming a charity to help war veterans and their families recover from the moral injury of war.

“People need psychological help — they are damaged inside,” Iryna said. “Every day it becomes worse and becomes a bigger problem for our society.” Stas picked up on that. “It is something we have to deal with now,” he said.

But it will take time. The outskirts of Kyiv are littered with the detritus of war — abandoned Russian tanks sit rusting along the sides of roads, for example. More ominously, the imposing forests outside of the capital are now littered with land mines. It could take years — perhaps as much as a decade, Iryna said — before the armaments are all removed.

And searing memories are never far away. We passed the church in Irpin where the Orthodox priest who married the couple presided: Fr. Vladimir Bormashev died while helping evacuate local residents. “No one knows if it was artillery shelling or a mine that flew,” Iryna said of the cleric’s killing.

Our last full day in Ukraine was marked by hearing air-raid sirens, and learning that rockets were bound for Kyiv, launched by Russian forces in the Black Sea. “Maybe we’ll see them on the way,” Iryna said casually as we headed for a morning interview south of the capital.

A clear, cloudless blue sky enveloping an expanse of flatlands similar to the plains of the Upper Midwest greeted us. Fortunately, we didn’t see any incoming rockets — though we did see soldiers along the highway at the ready with surface-to-air weapons.

“People are adaptable,” said Slava Esmontov, a Protestant chaplain we met later that morning in the city of Bila Tserkva



Translator Iryna Chernikova, 33, and her husband, Stas Nepokrytyi, 42, driver, in a restaurant in Bucha, a city just west of Kyiv and famous now for atrocities committed by Russian forces early in the war: “Who knew Bucha would ever be famous?” Iryna said. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)



Posters declaring the strength of the Ukrainian armed forces are common everywhere. This one is seen on a street in the western city of Lviv. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)



Dominican Sr. Edita Vozarova is pictured in a visit to the town of Serednje, near Mukachevo, Ukraine. Fr. Peter Zharkovskiy, right, a local priest with ties to Dominican sisters and to Caritas, is overseeing a project to expand housing for a group of displaced orphans and adults from the Russian-occupied city of Mariupol. (GSR photo/Gregg Brekke)

and who has shepherded humanitarian aid to the besieged areas of eastern Ukraine. “People get used to anything.”

His colleague, Nita Hansen, an American Presbyterian laywoman who heads a charity which assists Ukrainians living with physical disabilities, agreed that humans are surprisingly adaptable. “It’s not normal,” she said of the current situation. “But it becomes normal.”

That night, with air raid sirens in Kyiv blaring, we headed west on a 14-hour train journey to Warsaw. The trip required a stop the next morning along the Polish border for Ukrainian officials to query young Ukrainian men about their military eligibility.

In a cramped sleeper car that dated from the Soviet era, I reflected about those we had met. I realized that none of them — sisters, a journalist, a priest, a teacher, an attorney, a translator, an army chaplain, humanitarian workers — would say they are in any way remarkable. Rather, they are simply doing their best in demanding, trying and even absurd situations — a new normal.

As we passed through stretches of stark, overcast landscapes, both in Ukraine and Poland, my thoughts strayed back to the early days of our assignment in Mukachevo. I recalled what Sister Edita told me about meeting the displaced community in Serednje. “We don’t really have a collaboration with them yet,” she said during our interview. “But I’ve been thinking since yesterday that maybe we can provide some pillows and dishes to help them.”

I reminded Sister Edita that she had brought a crate of oranges for the residents. “Yes,” her face brightening at the memory. “It’s always nice for children to have some fresh fruit.”

A small but thoughtful gesture. But in a country where war is now normalized, even that was an act of grace.

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**Chris Herlinger** is international correspondent to Global Sisters Report and also writes on humanitarian and international issues for NCR. He has reported from South Sudan and Darfur, Sudan, as well as numerous other locales, including Haiti, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Israel and the Occupied Territories, Kenya and Ethiopia and Liberia. He is the co-author, with Paul Jeffrey, of books on Haiti and Darfur, published by Seabury, and a third, on global hunger, published in 2015.



A person mourns near the grave of a suicide bombing victim at Sellakanda Catholic cemetery April 23, 2019, in Negombo, Sri Lanka. (CNS/Reuters/Athit Perawongmetha)

## Nuns help survivors heal psychological wounds from Easter bombing attacks



by

**THOMAS SCARIA**

**COLOMBO, SRI LANKA** — April 20, 2023

On Saturday afternoons, Niranjalee Yasawaradana kneels down before three crosses in an open ground, talking for hours or sometimes crying, a practice she has continued for the past four years.

Her husband, Sampath Wickramaratna, and two daughters — Nethmi and Vishmi — are buried there along with more than 100 others who were killed on Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019, at St. Sebastian's Church in Katuwapitiya, a suburb of Negombo, Sri Lanka, near the nation's capital of Colombo.

Niranjalee (who prefers to use her first name) combines this graveyard visit with a Saturday evening Mass in the same church, where her entire family had perished in the terrorist attack. She said she has been able to overcome her anger over their deaths with the help of a sister who has served as a counselor, one of hundreds helping survivors of the blasts.

Approximately 272 people, including more than 50 children, were killed, and 500-plus injured on that day in separate suicide bomb attacks on three churches and three luxury hotels in Sri Lanka.

The largest casualty — 116 deaths, mostly Sri Lankan Catholics — occurred in Negombo's St. Sebastian's Church, followed by St. Anthony's Shrine in Colombo, with 55 deaths. Some 47

foreigners were killed in successive blasts in three hotels in Colombo.

The attacks were linked to ISIS and were carried out by nine suicide bombers attached to a little-known Sri Lankan Islamic militant group, National Thowheeth Jama'ath (National Monotheism Organization).

"My husband and children were well prepared for Easter with fast and prayer during Lent, not knowing Jesus would call them back on that special day," Niranjalee told Global Sisters Report in March, a month ahead of the bomb attacks' fourth anniversary.

The 48-year-old widow, her head shaven and scalp bearing injury marks, had survived the attack but remained unconscious for nearly two weeks in a hospital.

"The only thing left behind is these crosses with their pictures on them," she said, her eyes reflecting anger. She now lives with two pet dogs that were gifted to her to keep her occupied.

Niranjalee said she managed to get over her anger after long hours of counseling with Sr. Manoranji Murthy of the Sisters of Our Lady of Perpetual Help.

Murthy told GSR that when she first met Niranjalee, she refused to cook or take care of herself. "She asked me for whom she should cook," recalled the 33-year-old nun with a degree in psychology. The woman took two years to return to normalcy, she added.

Murthy is among some 200 sisters from more than 20 congregations involved in helping the victims of three separate church attacks recover from their trauma and lead a normal life, said Fr. Manjula Niroshan Fernando, who took charge of St. Sebastian's Church a week after the bomb attack.

All women's congregations based in Colombo and southern Sri Lanka are involved in the healing ministry, Fernando said, adding that he is still working hard to keep his more than 1,600 families (the country's largest parish) united as a community.



Niranjalee Yasawaradana, a widow who lost her husband and two daughters in the 2019 Easter bombing, prays before their crosses on her Saturday weekly visit to the mass burial grounds at St. Sebastian's parish church in Negombo, Sri Lanka. (Courtesy of Niranjalee Yasawaradana)



A clergyman prays over the casket of 13-year-old Dhami Brindya during her burial in Negombo, Sri Lanka, April 25, 2019, four days after suicide bomb attacks on churches and luxury hotels. (CNS/Reuters/Athit Perawongmetha)



Sr. Manoranji Murthy, a member of the Sisters of Our Lady of Perpetual Help and one of the counselors who accompany the survivors of the bomb attacks (Thomas Scaria)



Fr. Manjula Niroshan Fernando, the parish priest of the St. Sebastian's Church, Katuwapitiya in Negombo, Sri Lanka (Thomas Scaria)



Niranjalee Yasawaradana, who lost her entire family in the 2019 Easter bombing in Sri Lanka, shows photos she has in her home. (Thomas Scaria)



Niranjalee Yasawaradana, a widow who lost her husband and two daughters in the Easter bombing in 2019, stands in front of her house at Negombo, Sri Lanka. (Thomas Scaria)

Each family was assigned a nun, who is assisted by professional therapists whenever necessary.

Sri Lanka has 33 women religious congregations with more than 2,280 active and 165 contemplative nuns, said Oblates of Mary Immaculate Fr. Roshan Silva, who heads the Conference of Major Religious Superiors of Sri Lanka. The country also has 25 men's congregations with 788 priests and 165 brothers, who also help in the healing ministry.

Apostolic Carmel Sr. Maria Dhayalini observed that the nuns involved in the interventions at times developed stress and trauma themselves, but they largely overcame the crisis through sharing with other members, prayer and meditation.

Though they were all from different congregations and stayed at various convents around Negombo, "we supported each other in managing our own stress," Dhayalini said, adding that the Easter bombing crisis ultimately resulted in strengthened inter-congregational ties.

The Colombo Archdiocesan Family Apostolate assigned Niranjalee to Murthy when the woman was still in the hospital bed.

"Since then, I am frequently in touch with her," the nun said. "She regularly sends me morning greetings and calls me whenever she needs my presence." Building their initial rapport, she added, took several weeks, as it was very hard for the victims to accept the reality. Indeed, the apostolate asked therapists to just "accompany them in their struggles, agonies and pain in the first days before getting into any counseling sessions," Niranjalee said.

Dhayalini cared for a Buddhist and his Catholic wife whose 22-year-old daughter and 16-year-old son were killed when the church roof tiles fell on them. Their mother escaped with minor injuries.

She found the couple inconsolable and angry; they were "able to reconcile with the reality only after they were taken to Pope Francis when he prayed over them last year."

The couple were among some 100 affected families whom the Colombo Archdiocese took to Rome for a meeting with the pope as part of the healing ministry.

According to Vatican News, Francis told the visitors and roughly 3,500 Sri Lankan Catholics working in Italy on April 25, 2022, that he felt a closeness with the survivor families and urged Sri Lankan authorities to get to the truth behind the bomb attacks. The pope donated 100,000 euros to distribute among the survivor families.

Hasaru Shenal, who was in the delegation, said the meeting with the pope helped revive his faith in Jesus and overcome his grief over losing his "ever-smiling and loving mother" in the Katuwapitiya church attack.

"Now, I serve as a Sunday school teacher for children like me who have lost their dear ones," the 21-year-old told GSR. He and his father are among 14 families that received new houses from the government, which the church built on land they also provided.

"We have experienced the love and support of the entire Catholic Church in Sri Lanka," said Priyantha Jayakodi, Shenal's father, standing near a smiling photo of his wife.



The renovated St. Sebastian's Church, in Katuwapitiya, a suburb of Negombo, Sri Lanka, was hit by a suicide bomber during the Easter service on April 21, 2019, killing more than 100 parishioners, including 32 children. The parish priest, Fr. Manjula Nirosan Fernando, observed a low presence of devotees in the church campus after the Easter bombing. The church still has police security. (Thomas Scaria)



Hasaru Shenal survived the 2019 suicide bomb attack on St. Sebastian's Church but lost his mother, who did not survive. Shenal is pictured showing his photo with Pope Francis; a photo of his mother is behind him. (Thomas Scaria)



Dominican Sr. Sirima Opanayake, the principal of Ave Maria Branch School in Negombo, Sri Lanka, shows the pictures of the seven students killed in the Easter bombing at St. Sebastian's Church. (Thomas Scaria)





Priyantha Jayakodi, left, and his only son Hasaru Shenal stand before a photo of his wife, who was killed in the 2019 Easter bombing. (Thomas Scaria)



St. Anthony's Shrine in Kochchikade in Colombo city, renovated after the 2019 Easter bombing (Thomas Scaria)

Shenal, who was unconscious in the hospital's intensive care unit for two weeks, said he and his friends were initially scared to sit for Mass in St. Sebastian's Church.

Dominican Sr. Sirima Opanayake, who manages her congregation's school at St. Sebastian's, said she had lost seven students in the bombing. "It was a traumatic experience for teachers and students," she told GSR.

Opanayake coordinated a team that counseled students, teachers and parents for four months before they could restart classes.

The school built a memorial for the seven students and set up a scholarship in their names for poor children. Showing the students' pictures in the memorial hall, Opanayake said the school will commemorate them on the fourth anniversary.

Opanayake's students were among the 32 children killed in the attack at St. Sebastian's Church. St. Anthony's Shrine in Kochchikade, Colombo, lost 10 children, and the evangelical Zion Church in Batticaloa (about 200 miles northeast of Colombo) lost 14 Sunday school children in the Easter bombing among their 31 total deaths. Some 176 children lost one or both their parents in the attacks, said Fr. Lawrence Ramanayake, director of Seth Sarana Caritas Colombo.

Salvatorian Sr. Kanchana Silva Pulle handled two families: one of them was a Muslim husband and a Catholic wife who lost their 14-year-old daughter. She recalled the parents telling her about their only daughter — who at the time was preparing for baptism — dreaming about angels coming to take her to heaven a day before the tragedy.

Pulle said the nuns initially experienced rejection from the distraught survivors, but "we walked with them in their crisis," at a time when survivors naturally felt "agitated and angry, frustrated and depressed." Winning the trust of those affected,

Pulle said, "was a very tough time."

"We have been involved in their lives from the very day of the tragedy and the funeral of their loved ones till now," she said, adding that she also participated in the funeral of the Muslim children.

The people now show "the same concern for us," Pulle told GSR, highlighting the stress and fear she too felt throughout those early days.

Fernando said that, because young people in his parish seemed unable to cope with the stress and loss, he organized an exposure program for them with their counterpart in Mannar, a northern diocese that experienced civil war from 1983-2009.

Shenal, who now conducts leadership programs for the youth in his parish, said the exposure helped them learn to live with hope, and understand that they are not the only victims of terror attacks.

The parish priest of St. Sebastian's Church said there was no discrimination among Catholics and Protestants in the healing programs that the church supports, nor among other religions. The church's teams have engaged with victims of other church attacks in Sri Lanka, including a Protestant church in Batticaloa in the north. "Even the money donated by the pope was distributed to Protestant church members in Batticaloa," Fernando said, adding that sisters have worked with Muslim and Buddhist victims, as well.

Christians account for about 7% of Sri Lanka's more than 21.65 million population, with Catholics being the majority of Christians. Buddhists make up about 70%, Hindus 12%, and Muslims 10%, according to the 2012 census. Most victims of the bomb blasts were local Catholics.

Fernando said the main worry now is the elusive justice for



Salvatorian Sr. Kanchana Silva Pulle, a counselor who accompanied survivors of the 2019 Easter bomb attack in Sri Lanka (Thomas Scaria)



People tie a cross to a rope during Lent, a new practice that began after the 2019 Easter bombing at St. Sebastian's Church, most often done by relatives of those killed in the blast. (Thomas Scaria)



Nethmi and Vishmi, two daughters of Niranjalee Yasawaradana, with their father Sampath Wickramaratna just before the Easter Mass April 21, 2019, at St. Sebastian's Church. All three died in the suicide attack during the Mass. (Courtesy of Niranjalee Yasawaradana)

the survivors, although the nuns and others have done whatever possible for their socioeconomic and psychological needs.

"But when we are approaching the fourth anniversary, justice remains a mirage for the victims," he bemoaned.

In an Easter message on the fourth anniversary of the church attacks, Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe asserted his commitment to bring justice to the Easter bomb victims.

Though all the suicide attackers (who were proved to be associated with ISIS) died in the bombings, police quickly arrested around 200 people in connection with the Easter attacks, including a Muslim political leader arrested about two years after the incident. The government also banned 11 Muslim groups in Sri Lanka.

Ramanayake, the priest who also coordinates the rehabilitation of the survivors from the archbishop's residence, said Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith has pressured the government to "reveal the truth and do justice to the victims."

The survivors from the Katuwapitiya church have filed 182 cases seeking compensation from the government, while the Colombo shrine survivors have filed 104 cases.

According to Al Jazeera, the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka in January held the then-president and four others responsible for the failure to avert the bomb attacks and directed political leaders and top officials to compensate the victims with 310 million rupees (\$847,300) from their personal funds.

The archdiocese has also filed a Supreme Court petition to bring justice to the masterminds behind the attacks, Ramanayake told GSR. The trial, however, is still underway.

Niranjalee blames a political conspiracy for the slow progress of the investigation, believing that the government's security forces could have averted the tragedy if it had heeded the warnings from intelligence agencies, given several days before the attack.

"I will fight till I get justice," she said.

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**Thomas Scaria** is a senior journalist based in India who has worked in Sri Lanka until recently in an intergovernmental organization. He has written for the Union of Catholic Asian News since 1991 and received its 2000 Best Reporter award. He also writes for Matters India, a news portal that focuses on religious and social issues and collaborates with Global Sisters Report.



People gather with sisters after a church service in the town of Kiwanja, Rutshuru, Democratic Republic of Congo. (Stephano Kambale)

## COLUMN

# Sisters stay in Congo conflict zones to give voice to suffering people



by

**ROSE NAMULISA  
BALALUKA**

**DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO** — April 27, 2023

We are living the daily life of nuns in conflict zones. Specifically, we are living in the Masisi and Rutshuru territories of the Democratic Republic of Congo, under the umpteenth occupation by the M23 (the March 23 Movement), a rebel group that emerged in the aftermath of the war. They are made up primarily of ethnic Tutsis, and are said to be supported by the Rwandan government.

We are staying to give a voice to the general population. We have been interviewing Christians and non-Christians alike, about their perception of war, their relations with the M23 rebels, and the way in which they impact on the ministry of the religious sisters.

The local population appreciates the sisters and their work, but for women in general and for nuns in particular, war sometimes leads to a radical break with peace and their human rights. Women have become “spoils of war” since immemorial times. Their lifestyles have been profoundly changed because, caught in the midst of armed groups, they are victims of rape, killings, massacres and extreme violence. The nuns living in the territories occupied by the M23, and who failed to flee, are not immune to these basic rights violations.

We therefore experienced a break in the social bond with the basic ecclesial communities to which we are attached and for which we offer our religious ministry in hospitals, maternity

wards, schools and the like, because a great number of the population has fled from these zones. Radio Okapi said that 90% of the population fled!

In this context of warlike turbulence, we sisters have used an adaptation strategy. We cannot go into the villages; people come to us. So we thought it was important to find out how war has impacted the living conditions and the mission of the nuns living among the populations in Masisi and Rutshuru territories in Congo.

We did individual interviews with 14 people, including three religious sisters living in the conflict zones under M23 occupation, collecting data that we then analyzed from the dialogue with those who live in these areas.

On analysis, these populations living in M23 zones are experiencing indescribable violence. Most of our interviewees blame two facts:

First, the foreign and ethnic character of the so-called M23 Rebels makes them ruthless in perpetrating rapes, summary executions, mass killings, massacres, looting, vandalism and destruction of basic infrastructure such as health centers, schools, administrative buildings, and churches.

As in the past, the Rwandan Tutsis of the M23 armed group are inflicting a revenge war against the Bantou populations (including their brothers, Rwandan Hutu refugees, present in the subregion) and their new occupation of the territories is ephemeral — they raise a lot of money and return home to Rwanda and Uganda from where they came.

Second is their impunity: The most formidable criminals are

granted favors like ranks or ministerial posts. It turns out that, for some time in Congo, socio-professional promotion has been linked to the number of people killed on any occasion, whether peaceful demonstrations (authorized or not), rebellions, strikes or aggression.

The people we interviewed do not understand this because the demands that made their own leaders generals in the armed forces of Congo and its government have been the same since the Congolese Rally for Democracy (a political party and former rebel group supported by Rwanda) and the National Congress for the Protection of the People (CNDP), a political armed militia established in 2006.

Moreover, they do not understand how these killers claim the right to take up arms against an ethnic minority of Rwandan Tutsis in the country that has granted them hospitality as refugees or colonial workers.

In the murderous tragedy organized by the M23 rebels in Masisi and Ruthuru, women generally are paying heavy tolls. Mothers are frequently raped. Girls are raped in front of their parents, then taken away to serve as sex slaves in the bush.

Women, girls, and children watch helplessly as the men who failed to escape are beheaded. There are reports of young people being beaten to death for putting up the slightest resistance to compulsory marches in support of the rebels.

Women are at the same time forced to provide food (like beans, bananas, potatoes, goats, cassava) for the rebels. Some of them are then killed.



People attend a presentation by Catholic artists in the town of Kiwanja, Rutshuru, Democratic Republic of Congo. (Stephano Kambale)



Nurses and lay collaborators of the Sisters of St. Chrétienne are seen during a feast of the congregation's foundress in the town of Kiwanja, Rutshuru, Democratic Republic of Congo. (Stephano Kambale)



Congolese women gather in the churchyard in the town of Kiwanja, Rutshuru, Democratic Republic of Congo. (Stephano Kambale)

The religious sisters do not escape the fate reserved for all women. In Masisi and Rutshuru, several parishes and convents were systematically looted and destroyed. The people we interviewed said that the priests and nuns who were unable to flee are not there of their own will; they are forced to stay.

Only a few motorcycles circulate in the region. Vehicles are another rebel bait. Even though some priests continue to celebrate Mass, their situation is difficult. The people recognize that with this war, nuns have much more difficulty in carrying out their usual missions in hospitals, schools, orphanages or other charitable actions for the poor.

The religious sisters agreed that their missions are not very active. It is particularly difficult for them to go to the villages for fear of being raped or killed by the M23 rebels.

Nuns also say that since the war is political, nobody can predict exactly the time it will end. They have adopted a strategy: Members of the basic ecclesial communities are called to come to them. For those with educational missions, they cannot carry it on while schools are closed or serving as military camps. Other nuns do health work in hospitals and maternity wards where even the rebels receive their medical care.

All the people we interviewed affirm that the war waged by the M23 has had a negative impact on living conditions on all people in the Masisi and Rutshuru territories. The insecurity is total, and sisters are worried about the situation. Their missions have become increasingly more difficult to carry out during the war.

But, in perspective, they accept their current life as linked to their spirituality of offering themselves as a gift to God by exercising their missions through sharing the suffering of others. Their optimism and trust in God encourages them to pray even more.

They said they pray a lot for peace to return, which, by the

grace of God, is not impossible. And perhaps — not for the first time — the end of the M23 movement rumbles on the horizon.

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**Sr. Rose Namulisa Balaluka** is a member of the Dorothy Sisters of Cemmo in Bukavu, Democratic Republic of Congo. Fluent in English, French, and local languages like Kiswahili and Mashi, she has worked in public relations and communication for the Sisters of the Resurrection in Bukavu, and represents her community in its partnership with Medicines For Humanity. Currently, she is enrolled in Bukavu Teacher Training College, while teaching undergraduate English there. Her research interests are in child protection and the promotion of women's rights.



Sr. Molly Lim, a member of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, visits South Sudanese families living in Kakuma Refugee Camp Feb. 17. She and other sisters preach peace and counsel refugees suffering from trauma from experiencing civil war in South Sudan. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

## In Kakuma Refugee Camp, sisters foster peace between warring South Sudanese tribes



by

**DOREEN AJIAMBO**

**KAKUMA REFUGEE CAMP, KENYA** — May 15, 2023

On a hot and dusty afternoon in this sprawling United Nations camp, Sr. Molly Lim gathered a group of South Sudan's two predominant tribes, the Dinka and Nuer, for a dialogue on reconciliation and healing.

"Dear God in heaven ... may you give us the peace and understanding we need," she prayed as the members of the two tribes suffering from ethnic conflict bowed their heads and folded their hands. "Heal the wounds of our brothers and sisters who have gathered here. May God help us bear with each other and forgive one another."

Lim, a member of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, and other religious sisters lead such meetings twice a week to find ways the two rival tribes living in the camp can reconcile and regard one another as brothers and sisters.

The Dinka and Nuer ethnic tribes have been violent toward one another long before they moved to Kakuma Refugee Camp, where the hostility continues. Here, they fight each other to death at the slightest provocation, always armed with machetes, knives, and jerry cans of kerosene and petrol to attack each other in case of an argument. The fights and attacks sometimes lead to the deaths





Srs. Elizabetta Grobberio (front row) and Sabina Mueni (second from left) pose with refugees in Kakuma Refugee Camp. Religious sisters hold weekly meetings to teach the refugees about forgiveness and reconciliation. (Courtesy of Missionary Sisters of Charles De Foucauld)



Sr. Molly Lim, a member of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, prays with a south Sudanese refugee during her tour in the camp to preach peace and reconcile communities, Feb. 17, 2023. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

contrast, the Nuers blame the Dinkas for using state machinery to target and kill them.

“They don’t want to hear each other’s names,” said Padinjarepampil, a parish priest of Holy Cross parish in Kakuma Refugee Camp, who has worked there for nine years. “There was a time I was visiting one of the houses in the camp, and I found a particular group of youth fighting each other. They had broken bottles and were aiming at each other. I tried calming the situation, but it was very bad. One of the youths was seriously injured.”

The Dinka (representing 36% of the population) and the Nuer (16%) have been embroiled in the protracted conflict for decades. The two rival groups are semi-nomadic cattle keepers; in the past, they competed for pasture and water for their cattle, resulting in a conflict that has not yielded massive fatalities. However, analysts said that the firing of Machar by Kiir acted as a catalyst for mass violence.

Nyuop Muker Monytung, the former chief of Pibor village in eastern South Sudan who fled the country in 2013 after the civil war escalated, said the conflict between the two tribes worsened after Kiir incited the Dinkas.

“Kiir accused Machar of wanting his tribe to overthrow the government and kick out Dinkas,” said Monytung, a 54-year-old member of the Dinka tribe living in Kakuma. “The message by Kiir poisoned Dinkas, who wanted to kill and finish all the Nuers. However, the Nuers also retaliated, resulting in massive deaths and displacement.”

South Sudan’s civil war has left nearly 400,000 people dead. The violence has also displaced over 4 million people from their homes, including almost 2.2 million who have fled to neighboring countries, including Kenya’s Kakuma camp.

### A thirst for revenge

At the camp, tribe members tend to walk in groups wherever they go for their safety in case the rival group attacks them.

Gai Tong, a Nuer refugee living in the camp, said his heart is full of revenge against people from the Dinka tribe for killing his entire family.

“Whenever I see a Dinka, my blood boils. I feel very angry,” said the 24-year-old, sobbing and wailing. “I was told to watch as my mother and two uncles were burnt alive. One of my uncles was told to eat human flesh from his brother. After that, the rebels from the Dinka group tied us to a tree and left us for the dead. We were told that what we saw should be a lesson to all the Nuers.”

Tong, who arrived at the camp in 2016, was rescued by other Nuers on their way to Kakuma to seek refuge. His maternal uncle, who was forced to eat human flesh, became depressed and later died, he said.

“Since that time, I have had anger issues,” he said, noting that his tribe is always armed with machetes, clubs and spears in case Dinkas attack them. “When I see a Dinka, I want to attack him and get revenge for the things they did to our tribe. They hate us, and we hate them, too. They are the root cause of the problems we are going through in our country.”

One Dinka woman who arrived at the camp in 2017 from Jonglei state told GSR that rebel soldiers from the Nuer ethnic community raped her and her three daughters before murdering her husband and five of her seven children.

“You can’t forget such a thing; revenge is the only solution because it can console you,” said the 48-year-old mother, who requested anonymity. “I always have nightmares of





Dinka and Nuer refugees attend a gathering organized by religious sisters to discuss the importance of maintaining peace, reconciling and forgiving each other as they live together in Kakuma Refugee Camp. (Courtesy of Missionary Sisters of Charles De Foucauld)

Nuers attacking me and wanting to rape me again, and suddenly I wake up and start screaming for help. The incident affects me, and when I see a man from the Nuer community, I usually start running away while screaming.”

### Religious sisters intervene

The hostility in the camp has prompted religious sisters to find ways of reconciling these communities and empowering them.

Lim, who hails from Singapore and has worked in the camp for more than seven years, said they introduced weekly counseling and prayer sessions to help thousands of refugees recover from the wounds and scars caused during the civil war.

During the counseling sessions in groups of 20 to 40 people, mainly from the Dinka and Nuer, refugees traumatized by injuries or memories of how their loved ones were brutally killed can freely share their experiences.

“Some of the refugees cry uncontrollably when they narrate their horrific experiences, but that’s the way of healing and accepting themselves,” said Lim, adding that some are taken to hospitals for professional assistance. “We encourage refugees to forgive each other, show love to each other and live in peace as brothers and sisters.”

Grobberio said they frequently bring together the Nuer and Dinka communities in meetings intended to reduce tensions in the camp, with the hopes that the two communities can eventually work together. During the meetings, the sisters allow them to talk and share their ideas on how peace can be achieved among themselves.

“The Dinka and Nuer communities end up talking to each other after the meeting, which is a great achievement,” she said. “We also involve the two communities in activities that unite them, like soccer, netball and athletics. They participate, cheer and finally greet each other after the match. Such activities have slowly brought peace between the communities.”

Grobberio noted that prayers and sharing the Gospel with refugees have also brought peace among the warring communities in the camp. The nun has formed small groups of Christian refugees in every corner of the camp, with the groups visiting other refugees’ homes with sisters to encourage them to accept Christ, join the church and be part of their group.

“The prayers and Gospel are working because more people, regardless of the tribe, are coming to church and joining Christian groups in their areas of residence,” she said. “The refugees forgive each other after they understand the love of Christ and how God loves them despite the situation they are going through.”

The sisters have also empowered refugees by providing practical job training in tailoring and dressmaking, masonry, catering and accommodation, hairdressing, welding, plumbing and baking.

Padinjareparampil said that priests and sisters together have held meetings for both tribes to share activities — such as sports and music festivals — to remind them of their culture and encourage them to trade together. These activities have been a way of bringing peace, healing and acceptance, he said, as has the formation of different groups of men, women and youth who meet every Sunday after Mass.

Meanwhile, Tong said that he had started attending the counseling and prayer sessions carried out by the sisters to deal with his anger issues.

“In every session, I’m taught about forgiveness and acceptance,” he said. “The sisters are holding meetings for both communities to discuss our issues, and I am learning how to peacefully coexist with my fellow refugees and view the Dinkas as brothers rather than enemies.”

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**Doreen Ajiambo** is the Africa/Middle East correspondent for Global Sisters Report based in Kenya. She covers the missions and ministries of Catholic women religious and writes about humanitarian and environmental issues across sub-Saharan Africa that affect the people they serve. Her previous work has been published by Religion News Service, Catholic News Service, Refugees Deeply, USA Today and the Global Post, among other outlets.



In Kaduna state, Nigeria, Hope for the Village Child Foundation, a local nonprofit, organizes routine health outreach programs in rural communities. The foundation is run by Sr. Rita Schwarzenberger, who works to promote peace in the region. (Provided photo)

## Dominican Sisters promote peace in Nigeria's conflict-prone communities



by

**PATRICK EGWU**

**NIGERIA** — June 15, 2023

Sr. Rita Schwarzenberger, a member of the Dominican Sisters of Peace, has been working as a missionary in Nigeria for about 50 years.

Originally from Kansas, Schwarzenberger taught English language and Christian religious studies to would-be teachers for students at government secondary schools. After moving to Nigeria, she started justice, development and peace work with the Sokoto Diocese.

Schwarzenberger, 79, currently lives in Kaduna state, north central Nigeria, advancing catechetical teachings and working with local communities and individuals to promote peace.

Like most troubled northern states in the country, Kaduna has seen its own fair share of religious violence. Ethnic tensions and growing attacks by armed bandits, who target mostly Christians and areas where they live, have exacerbated the situation.

In March, gunmen attacked a rural Christian settlement, killing 17 people. Four days later, 10 Christians were killed, heightening tensions in the region.

Schwarzenberger works on a project called “Protecting our Communities Initiative,” which is aimed at addressing lingering conflicts in local communities through sustained community-led approaches.

According to its website, the project is based on the idea of the role community members,

“You don’t isolate peace. Any chance you get you work with anybody working for peace. We take part in anything that would promote peace because we think that peace is so crucial right now in our area.”

— *Sr. Rita Schwarzenberger*

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women and youth can play in dissuading conflicts through nonviolent means.

“One of the things we do is to get communities to set up early warning response systems,” she said. “We have gotten involved to work for peace in communities such as improving early warning and response systems.”

Funded by the Karuna Center for Peace Building, a Massachusetts-based organization working to empower people divided to create sustainable peace, the project is implemented in partnership with the Neem Foundation, a crisis response organization.

According to its website, the Neem Foundation’s mission is to promote the protection of locals and communities living in areas affected by conflicts, violence and fragility.

Schwarzenberger and her team from the Neem Foundation engage community leaders and advocacy groups to discuss peace initiatives that help prepare residents on how to detect and respond to conflicts and violence.

“You know little things can blow up overnight,” she said. “You have the issue of religion in communities so things can escalate very easily. There is also a high level of tribalism.”

As a pilot program, Schwarzenberger and the team at Neem Foundation worked with six communities and two local government areas in the region affected by conflicts and violent attacks by bandits. The team set up local committees in rural communities for early warning and response.

The goal for the pilot program, Schwarzenberger said, is to see what was working and what was not.

“This really helped because people found out that cattle rustling, for example, ended because as soon as someone sees there is a chance of violence, they would notify the response team who will take action,” she said.

Schwarzenberger is all too familiar with violence in the state and said working with the locals is the best way to deal with violent escalations when they happen.

The team also trained locals in dialogue and psychosocial approach to conflict response, resolution and de-escalation.

“It’s a whole integrated program and has been widely successful,” she said. “We know the training has been effective in these communities and we are hoping to expand it to other communities.”

Schwarzenberger said they work with other partners such as government instituted peace commissions or global peace

foundations who are passionate and committed to promoting peace in local communities.

“You don’t isolate peace,” she said. “Any chance you get you work with anybody working for peace. We take part in anything that would promote peace because we think that peace is so crucial right now in our area.”

To reach local communities, Schwarzenberger and her team do a radio program which she said has been very successful.

The idea, she said, is to reach the people in the remote areas so they can spread the word of countering conflicts and promoting peace while receiving feedback for future actions.

Radio is a powerful tool for communication in northern Nigeria. Most households have a radio which they use to listen to news and education programs in Hausa, the local language of the region.

During the program, Schwarzenberger and her team invite people from the rural villages to participate.

She said they normally discuss the value of dialogue or how peace can be promoted between local farmers and herders. At other times, they discuss women and their basic rights.

“It depends on the issue at the time,” she said. “The idea of the program is that people themselves have to take the initiative for peace in their communities. They have to come up with the solution. The team only trains and facilitates them to be able to do that.”

### **Running a local nonprofit**

Schwarzenberger has been running Hope for the Village Child Foundation, a local nonprofit organization in Kaduna since January 2003.

The nonprofit, which has a staff base of 32, works with people in rural communities in the areas of health, clean water, education, sustainable agriculture and outreach programs.

“Our basic goal is to help the people to become self-reliant, independent, and to know their own dignity,” she said.

The organization’s primary focus is on children and women’s development through empowerment programs.

“We believe that if you can’t help the family, then you can’t help the child,” said Schwarzenberger, who runs a special program for children with disabilities or diseases such as rickets.

The organization has a clinic inside their premises. The children are routinely scheduled for corrective surgeries at



The Hope for the Village Child Foundation's primary focus is on children and women's development through empowerment programs. (Provided photo)



Sr. Rita Schwarzenberger, third from the left, takes a photo with members of the community who have received walking aids. (Provided photo)

orthopedic hospitals and provided with after care treatments for their recovery.

Last year, more than 2,000 children were enrolled for rickets treatment.

Routinely, the organization plans an outreach program in the rural areas to investigate tropical illnesses, incidents of malaria, and genotyping to prevent sickle cell disease.

During the outreach programs, the team runs tests and returns with blood samples for use in their lab in the city. On each visit, for example, the team returns with 200 to 500 samples.

"The stress is on malaria because it is very high in this area," Schwarzenberger said. "Our staff is well trained. We have nurses, midwives and our laboratory technician is fantastic."

Schwarzenberger said that clean water is a basic essential for local communities in the area who use it for their homes. Since 1998, through the help of donors and individuals in the U.S, the organization has provided more than 400 wells in different communities.

Schwarzenberger doesn't work alone. Sr. Juliana Ekwoanya, of the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena, moved to Kaduna in 2019 from Gusau to work with Schwarzenberger at the organization. She has been working at the nonprofit since the last four years.

Before the bandits' attack became too intense, the organization ran mobile clinics for rural communities. Ekwoanya, a nurse-midwife and head of the health program, said this has been put on hold for security reasons and currently operates limited services.

"Before we received patients at any hour of the day but this has changed," said Ekwoanya, who added that there is flexibility for pregnant women and those with urgent health

emergencies.

Schwarzenberger said the program also teaches people how to use sustainable environment-friendly methods of farming to increase crop yield and food production that helps to reduce poverty.

"Like the pope said in his encyclical, this is about the poor and about the earth," she said.

### Targeted and displaced by bandits

In 2014, Schwarzenberger built a small convent in a rural village in Kaduna where she lived alone, surrounded by neighbors. Ekwoanya moved into the convent in 2019.

After some of the bandits' victims told the sisters that they had been marked for attacks, Schwarzenberger realized they needed to relocate.

"First of all, I didn't realize I was the target," she said. "Some people who were kidnapped overheard the abductors talking about me. Three of us in the village were targeted. We were seen as their major target."

In August 2021, the bandits attacked the convent at night. Luckily, Scharzenberger was visiting the U.S. and Ekwoanya was away on a retreat.

"They didn't know we were not around," Ekwoanya told GSR. "We had to run before we became victims."

She said the attackers damaged a lot of things, looted their valuable properties and shot at the house, including the chapel.

"We never went back again," she said.

Schwarzenberger and Ekwoanya moved out of the convent in Kaduna to where they would be safer.

Schwarzenberger said she stopped going to the Hope for the Village Child Foundation office after she was specifically



Women and children celebrate the commissioning of a new water source in their community provided by the Hope for the Village Child Foundation. (Provided photo)

targeted. She currently works from home, responding to emails, coordinating activities and attending virtual meetings.

“We live in a peaceful area now,” Schwarzenberger said. “I do not go to the office now because the staff feel that if the bandits come to get me, I will be putting them at risk. A young man was kidnapped from our village and the bandits asked him, ‘Where is the white sister? We still want her,’” she explained.

Schwarzenberger said she doesn’t travel out of the city unless it is extremely necessary because of the associated security risks.

In March last year, a train carrying 362 passengers was attacked by suspected bandits. The rail tracks were targeted with explosives and dozens of passengers were abducted. More than 10 passengers were killed. The families of those abducted paid N800 million (about \$1.7 million) before they were released some months later.

Between June and July 2022, about N653.7 million (about \$1.1 million) was paid as ransom to gunmen for the release of kidnap victims in Nigeria, according to a report by SMB Intelligence, a Lagos-based security research firm.

The report showed that from July 2021 to June 2022, “no fewer than 3,420 people were abducted across Nigeria,” while 564 were killed in the process.

The group said Nigerians paid about \$20 million to

kidnappers between 2011 and 2020.

Ekwoanya said seeing photos of the bullets in the walls at the convent after the attack instilled so much fear in the sisters that nobody was willing to take the risk of living or visiting there.

“It was not a good experience,” she said. “While at the house, we couldn’t sleep for many nights because of gunshots. I was traumatized severely but if you run away from the people what hope are you giving them?”

Ekwoanya said the experience has affected her mental and physical health.

“If I was not a sister, I wouldn’t be here because it’s risky,” she said. “But when you look around and see that there are people who are helpless and have no place to run to, then you make the sacrifice to help them believing that God will also protect you but also being careful.”

She quipped: “You have to be alive to carry on the mission work.”

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**Patrick Egwu** is a Nigerian freelance journalist based out of Toronto. His work on human rights, social justice, religion, migration and development has been published by Foreign Policy, Daily Maverick, National Catholic Reporter, Global Sisters Report and elsewhere.



People board a truck as they leave Khartoum, Sudan, on June 19. Clashes resumed between Sudan's military and a powerful paramilitary force after a three-day cease-fire expired June 21. (AP, file)

## Remaining Salesian Sisters brave Sudan war to care for wounded and displaced



by

**TAWANDA  
KAROMBO**

**HARARE, ZIMBABWE** — June 29, 2023

Sr. Teresa Roszkowska remembers May 24 — the worst day in her 44 years as a Salesian Sister of Don Bosco living in Sudan — with a sense of trepidation, fear and insecurity.

On this day, Roszkowska and three others of her order were saying the rosary inside the dining room at their house 20 kilometers outside the capital city of Khartoum when “heavy and horrible shootings” broke out. It was not for the first time, nor would it be the last.

Despite ceasefire agreements between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the two warring parties at the center of the civil conflict have been plaguing Sudan since April 15.

Sudan fell into the hands of military control in 2021 after Omar Ahmad al-Bashir was thrown out of power in a coup in 2019. The military-controlled government has now fractured, leading to the outbreak of war as they fight for control of power.

The SAF and RSF have been dueling, with intense fighting on the streets of Darfur and Khartoum, affecting ordinary citizens, destroying infrastructure and halting school and church activities, as well as shutting down about 11 hospitals. The war has plunged the country into a crisis, leaving 600 people dead and 1 million others displaced from their homes, many of them fleeing

‘There are days when we are full of abnormally fearful silence and all we do is just pray, and hope that God will touch those hearts of stone.’

— *Salesian Sr. Teresa Roszkowska*

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into neighboring countries.

Roszkowska, who is from Poland and arrived in Sudan on Jan. 24, 1989, has been witnessing the impact of the war on ordinary Sudanese people firsthand. She has had to stand steadfast amid the gloom of war at a time when other religious have been forced to flee.

On May 24, “we could not hear each other because of the noise from the shootings,” she said. She added that, “in fear, some lay on the floor, feeling like it was the end” of the world.

“We decided to run to the chapel for safety but that is the moment that the scared and wounded people from the shootings started to arrive at our house. As I ran towards the gate to open it, I really felt like it was the end of the world because of the sight of scared people running towards the house,” Roszkowska told Global Sisters Report in an interview.

Her fear comes not out of her own vulnerability but out of care and worry for the situation that the war-ravaged citizens and children of Sudan have found themselves in, she said.

There has been no real abatement to the crisis as the war rages on, disrupting telecom services and electricity supplies for lengthy periods. In fact, says Roszkowska, in mid-June the situation was “still worse” as several gunmen exchanged fire and shot wantonly into places where civilians were.

“The house was full of people as they were exchanging shooting and many more poor people, some with their children, were arriving wounded. Actually, one of the soldiers was the one bringing many of them from the shacks around our area.

“There has been no day without these kinds of shootings and we are actually starting to get used to the sounds.”

The Salesian Sisters of Don Bosco in Sudan say they “have nothing special to help the wounded with” and are forced to use an over-the-counter antiseptic and disinfectant to clean wounds. They occasionally administer antibiotics.

Most clinics and hospitals have been forced to close, and humanitarian assistance such as medications and food are often looted while access to affected areas has at times been restricted, according to Médecins Sans Frontières.

“After the looting of one of our medical warehouses in Khartoum, fridges were unplugged and medicines removed. The entire cold chain was ruined so the medicines are spoiled and can’t be used to treat anyone,” said Jean-Nicolas Armstrong Dangelser, emergency coordinator for Médecins Sans Frontières in Sudan.

### **Religious flee Sudan war**

Over the years, a strong community of international Catholic sisters and other religious has been active in Sudan. According to Roszkowska, there have been many Catholic sisters from as far as India, El Salvador, Vietnam, South Sudan and Poland.

However, after the latest war erupted in April, only four Salesian Sisters of Don Bosco remain in Sudan. Global Sisters Report recently reported on Sr. Angelina Ebrahim Trilly Koko of the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd saying that her congregation had already shut down several schools and hospitals serving thousands of residents and stopped pastoral work.

On April 30, Archbishop Michael Didi Adgum Mangoria of Khartoum confirmed that “many people, including priests and nuns, have fled the most contested areas” of Sudan since April 15.

Amid this situation, Roszkowska and the other three remaining Salesian Don Bosco Sisters continue to assist those affected by the war in Sudan. Roszkowska says the sisters are “living and working among poor people living round our house in shacks and tents,” after being displaced from their homes.

The Don Bosco Sisters run a primary school with 840 children. However, because of the war, there have been no classes since April 15. For now, the sisters run a small dispensary that functions as a first aid room for the children and others injured by the war.

Before the war, the sisters assisted women in learning to be self-reliant through courses such as pasta- and bread-making, as well as baking biscuits and dressmaking. But the courses cannot be conducted now because the beneficiaries are constantly on the move, fleeing the war.

“True and deep love for the people to whom I am sent is keeping me going and I feel this strength is from God as a religious mission,” Roszkowska said. “By being with the people of Sudan, all their troubles and suffering are mine too; when they cry, I cry with them.”

At present, the Don Bosco Salesian Sisters of Sudan are providing shelter and food to some of those affected by the war, Christians and Muslims, and helping to save them from “bullets and senseless” fighting.



A man walks by a house hit in fighting between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces in Khartoum, Sudan, on April 25. (AP/Marwan Ali)



Smoke rises over Khartoum, Sudan, June 7, as fighting between the Sudanese Armed Forces and paramilitary Rapid Support Forces continues. (AP)

“Daily about 100-140 children and mothers, sick, old, wounded are staying with us and they also get food here too,” Roszkowska said. “Other pastoral programs are not possible at all. Every evening, we say the rosary with all the children and mothers in our house.”

What is further compounding the situation for the Don Bosco Sisters of Sudan is that “there are not any agencies working or collaborating” with them. Being aged above 60 “and not in good health,” the four Salesian Sisters have however resumed Mass which they have not had for more than a month.

### ‘Hope for the better’

Very often, especially when the shootings are nearby, it is easy to feel hopeless, explained Roszkowska. However, greater hope for a better and peaceful Sudan gives the sisters the divine urge and unexplainable power to soldier on with the work of assisting the people.

“Yes, very often we feel hopeless, and more so at this current time we are in now,” she said. “We just live as best as we can, knowing that we only have today to live as tomorrow may not be ours. But deep down, we have this overwhelming hope for the better.”

In this sudden and horrible situation, there is nothing special to be happy about, Roszkowska said.

After the sisters’ courage and decision at the beginning of the war to “open our home for whoever needs shelter and food,” the house started to fill up with “children and poor people day and night.” Seeing these people have access to food and shelter, their hearts were filled with “immense, unspoken deep joy” until now.

Yet amid the turmoil, senseless destruction of property and shootings, displacement of innocent civilians and killings, the Salesian Sisters’ optimism is tinged with a sense of uncertainty for the future.

Their only faith that the situation will turn around for the better is in God’s ability to turn the hearts of steel and bullets of those at the center of the conflict into hearts of peace.

“We can’t imagine what ‘they’ are planning to do next, or which ways they want to pursue to stop this senseless war,” Roszkowska said. “There are days when we are full of abnormally fearful silence and all we do is just pray, and hope that God will touch those hearts of stone, change their minds and that the situation will be better.”

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**Tawanda Karombo** is a journalist based in Harare, Zimbabwe, who specializes in sub-Saharan Africa, covering climate, environment, health, economics and all things Catholic in southern Africa. Contact him at [tawakarombo@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:tawakarombo@yahoo.co.uk) and follow him on Twitter [@tawakarombo](https://twitter.com/tawakarombo).





Parishioners attend a Mass at Santo Domingo de Guzman church in Managua, Nicaragua, Aug. 2, 2022. (OSV News/Reuters/Maynor Valenzuela)

## COLUMN

# In Nicaragua, we feel small and persecuted, but not abandoned by God

by

**FLYING IN V  
FORMATION**



translated by

**SR. MARY ROSE  
KOCAB, OVISS**

**NICARAGUA** — July 21, 2023

We are accompanied by “a thick cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1-4).

Events occur in life that allow us to be firsthand witnesses and that transform our lives. From the dimension of faith, we are all primary witnesses of our own encounter with Jesus, who moves us, frees us from apathy, and leads us to be heralds and preachers of the good news, his resurrection.

A clear sign of the power of his Spirit, who guides and sustains, is being in places where life is crying out. It also leads us to take risks and, with courage, to fight for the changes that are necessary for life.

We are accompanied in Nicaragua by a cloud of firsthand witnesses, a small remnant of people who continue to sustain everyday life, and endure with faith and hope, confident that this experience of death will pass. Sometimes, we think that evil incarnate, personified in the actions of a few in the country, have a well-structured timeline for attacking and digging their claws into the wounded heart of the people.

Consecrated life continues to stand firm with the people of God, being a witness of the mockery that is inflicted on congregations through countless obstacles put in their way to discourage them from remaining in the mission. They also endure endless struggles to avoid losing members, works

and property that do so much good for the human and psycho-spiritual growth of Nicaragua.

Consecrated life is a testament to the cruel operations of this nefarious dictatorship that is leading the country to a slow suicide in vital areas of people and institutions.

We know that our eyes are fixed on Jesus; however, it is very painful to see that mistrust is growing between religious men and women, and between the Episcopal Conference of Nicaragua and the members of local churches, as a result of the ideology that has blinded many of them and created even greater division. “Divide and conquer” is the tactic of evil, coupled with a noisy and often complicit silence that leaves much to be desired.

Those who speak out and try to denounce the situation or defend some political prisoner or other reality are imprisoned, their license to practice their profession is taken away, and they are murdered or exiled.

Juggling it all weighs heavily on our hearts, begging the Spirit to help us to know what to say and how to say it so as not to endanger the lives of the people. This is an apocalyptic experience because, in the midst of fear, uncertainty and persecution, we try to continue to announce, with our lives, the presence of Jesus, who is also a witness of this very harsh reality.

We feel small and persecuted, but not abandoned by the God of Jesus who has his hands on the people and blesses and sustains us. Now is the time to learn to reinvent ourselves, and to contemplate our reality without comparisons or succumbing to pessimism, in order to continue weaving unity, fraternity and democracy with the threads of life.

There are times when it seems that they want to rob us of the desire to dream. There are institutions that are dying, others have ceased to exist, and hunger and poverty are beginning to increase.

Being witnesses of the profound crises that we are living makes us fearless in trying to discover what God is asking in these moments of each Christian, and of persons of goodwill. We must fine-tune our senses to connect to those proposals that are timidly continuing to sustain life and faith.

It is up to us to discern how and where to continue being what we are called to be as disciples of Jesus — “leaven in the dough” — in these turbulent times of life. We have to be prophetic in the places where we are, recognizing that we are also vulnerable, and often outraged/powerless, strong/weak, collaborating with the people in the midst of fear and uncertainty.

We are a cloud of human witnesses, fragile, but with a heart that continues to long for that “great homeland” of which our poet Rubén Darío dreamed. We also dream of not leaving to our future generations more deterioration and breakdown of family, social, political and ecclesial fabric.

Together, we strive for transformation through the conversion of each person who has realized that we cannot close our eyes

and separate life from events, because we understand that although faith is essential nourishment for the development of life, its consistent practice is what will lead us to true change.

Witnesses preach with their lives and transmit events, trying to be faithful to what they have observed, so that together we can re-read each one and learn lessons from them. It is necessary to continue learning, as people of God, to discern, according to the light of the Word and faith, what are the next steps and choices we will have to make in order to remain faithful to those intuitions of the Spirit present in this desire of Nicaragua to be “reborn.”

That cloud of witnesses was formed in April 2018, when Nicaraguan government forces killed protesters.

April is life and hope that beats strongly from the depths of each heart that knows that we are all interconnected by our convictions.

April is that which was dreamed one day and desired to come to life from the most ontological thing we have.

April is that tsunami of vital force that propels life and implies the internal movement of transformation. It cannot be contained or silenced and has the capacity to overwhelm and destroy the dams and barriers of the unjust, the insolent, and shameless.

April is written with the A for amar (love), because its name represents the strength of the living love that is in every fiber of the hearts of those of us who dare to dream of a better present and a better tomorrow.



Postcards designed by the Museum of Memory against Impunity together with the Association of Mothers of April demand justice for the victims of April 1988, when protesters were killed by government forces in Nicaragua. (Courtesy of Flying in V Formation)



Sr. Karen Burke, left, and Sr. Annelle Fitzpatrick, center, are flanked by refugees the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood in Brentwood, New York, have welcomed onto their campus. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

## Long Island sisters open their doors, and their hearts, to refugees



by GSR international correspondent

**CHRIS HERLINGER**

**BRENTWOOD, NEW YORK** — September 21, 2023

The answer was an affirmative yes.

With Afghanistan's fall to the Taliban in August 2021, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood, New York, were asked by contacts on Long Island's interfaith community if "the nuns" had any extra space on their campus to house incoming refugees.

The sisters said they did. So, in December 2021, the doors of the congregation's large campus on central Long Island opened — and "opened wide" as several sisters say — and have remained so for nearly two years now.

What began as a small initiative to welcome a few refugees has now become a growing and sustained program that has housed 23 adults and 16 children from three countries — Afghanistan, Pakistan and Ukraine — on a large 211-acre campus with more than a dozen buildings.

Three buildings — including a small wing of an older dormitory-style building and several smaller residential houses — are accommodating the arrivals, who have been accepted through a number of agencies, including Catholic Charities, Women for Afghan Women and a Ukrainian initiative of Lutheran Social Services of New York.

"We have space and resources," said Sr. Tesa Fitzgerald, the congregation's president. "It's a sin not to do it."



A Ukrainian flag flies outside a house on the campus of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood, New York, where two Ukrainian families resided. The house now flies an Afghanistan flag in front where Afghan families live, along with Srs. Karen Burke and Clara Santoro. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)



Igor Konovalova, Sr. Karen Burke and Igor's wife, Anna, outside the home where the couple lives with another Ukrainian family. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

“It’s the humane thing to do,” said Sr. Annelle Fitzpatrick, who directs the program. “Jesus would be the first to open the door and say, ‘Welcome.’”

She added: “It’s brought new life to these old walls,” saying that what the congregation is doing is making concrete its charism “That all might be one,” and that it is important to respond “to the needs of our times.”

The 293-member congregation was unanimous in its welcome. “Not a single sister has said anything negative about this. That’s a miracle,” Fitzpatrick said.

The needs are concrete — whether it be helping find jobs for the new arrivals or determining, because of immigration status, who can or cannot receive public benefits.

In evaluating the program’s first year, Sr. Karen Burke said that the congregation was prepared for the many attendant challenges in welcoming the refugees — be they “overcoming language barriers, securing health insurance, applying for [public assistance] SNAP benefits, enrolling kids in school, or dealing with issues of depression and post-traumatic syndrome.”

What the sisters were not prepared for, she said, was “how labor intensive the ministry to displaced families would become.”

The layers are many and complex.

“The time involved in taking refugees to interviews, medical appointments, enrolling children in school, and attending immigration hearings is incredibly time-consuming,” Burke said.

That is why it has been necessary to hire a part-time case manager to help the program director in day-to-day work — work that Burke believes will only expand if more arrivals are welcomed to the campus.

In addition to housing refugees, providing vocational training and courses in English as a second language, the

Brentwood sisters also host the Long Island Immigration Clinic on their campus, a center where sisters and community volunteers counsel immigrants on asylum claims, assist in finding legal assistance and prepare the arrivals for court appearance and immigration interviews.

In taking a strong “pro-immigrant” stance, Burke believes that the congregation is taking a principled position that can serve as a practical example to other sister communities wanting to do the same.

“Other congregations have asked, ‘How do you start this?’ How can we do what you’re doing?” she said. There is not one single answer to that, though Burke said two things help: One is having available space. The other is being located in a larger community which has a history of welcoming immigrants.

Once a predominately white enclave, the city of Brentwood — with a population of about 62,000 — is now 73.5% Hispanic or Latino, according to census data. “We’re in an immigrant community,” Burke said, “and that’s made it easier for us to do our work. They are very supportive.”

### **Arrivals feel safe after experience in war-torn areas**

In several interviews over the last 10 months, the refugees have expressed relief that, coming from countries such as Afghanistan and Ukraine, they are in a safe place.

They say they are simply happy to be alive.

“I love everything about America,” said Hussain Shams, an Afghan refugee who worked as a photographer in Kabul and arrived in the United States in August 2022 and then in Brentwood a month later.

Shams is now employed as a painter and carpenter on the Brentwood campus and would like to become a skilled maintenance man. He continues his English education, as



Recent refugees Hussain Shams, Omar Shams, Nadia Khan, Saliha Shams and Tamana Sayed watch TV at their residence on the campus of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood in Brentwood, Long Island, New York. The sisters are offering temporary housing to a number of refugees from at least three countries. Khan is from Pakistan; the others are from Afghanistan. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)



Recent Ukrainian refugees in January this year at a residence on the campus of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood, New York. On the left, Kseniia (Kate) Kasieieva and her husband, Oleksandr (Alex) Somin, On the right, Anna Konovalova and her two children, son Herman and daughter Diana. Later in the year, in June, Anna and the children were reunited with their father, Igor. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)



Igor and Anna Konovalova are flanked by their children upon Igor's arrival at John F. Kennedy International Airport in June. (Courtesy of Anna Konovalova)

does his wife, Saliha, who was recently hired as an assistant teacher in the universal pre-K program on campus. The couple's sons are enrolled in local schools.

"We have a future here. There isn't hope in Afghanistan now," Saliha said about life under Taliban rule since 2021.

Meanwhile, Tamana Sayed, another Afghan refugee, has received her GED diploma and hopes to attend college. Though she works now on the sisters' large on-campus farm, Sayed would like to get a permanent job off-campus.

Hope for the future also animates the lives of the Ukrainians.

"It's definitely peaceful," said Oleksandr (Alex) Somin, one of the Ukrainian arrivals — and that makes it easier to focus on acquiring work, settling down and having new aspirations. But, he added, immigrants always face challenges. "It's a completely different culture," he said. "Different rules. You have to adjust to the culture."

Still, as he eyes doing work in online sales, Somin sees more opportunities in the United States and hence, a more comfortable future.

Even before the war, he said, it was "difficult to get the right job, to get what you want" in Ukraine.

But the war itself has caused him and others to feel that a chapter has turned, perhaps permanently, with people having left Ukraine and friendships in the country now harder to sustain. "We miss Ukraine a lot. We miss our previous life," Somin said. "But I don't think we can rebuild that."

Somin's family lives with two other Ukrainian families in a two-story house on the campus. The newest arrival, in June, was Igor Konovalova, whose wife, Anna, had been living in the United States since June 2022 with the couple's two children, a son aged 5, and a daughter aged 9.

That was a nerve-wracking year, Anna said, recalling the constant worry about her husband's safety. Igor worked as a commercial director at a bread factory in the central Ukrainian city of Dnipro and had volunteered to work close to the front lines of the war, helping distribute bread — an experience he described "as scary."

Both of the couple's children are attending local schools but the daughter is also doing online learning in Ukrainian. "If you lose your culture, you lose yourself," Anna said.

In an interview just weeks after Igor arrived in the United States, the couple expressed happiness of being reunited but also spoke of the uncertainties ahead of whether to remain in the United States when the war ends or to return to Ukraine, which will eventually need massive reconstruction assistance. Both have family remaining in Ukraine.

"It's our country," Anna said of the experiences of the last 18 months in Ukraine and the dismay and disruption caused by Russia's full-scale invasion. "We had a normal life," she added wistfully.

For now, both are employed — Anna in the high-tech sector and Igor working in the cable business. Of the two, Igor seems more intent on making a go of things in the United States.

"We have an opportunity to live in the U.S, to work, for the children to go to school," he said. "I'm happy with it."

## Challenges in a new country are numerous

The couple's English is good and learning English, of course, is an important element in acquiring the skills needed for success in new lives. Yet English is often not an easy language to learn, especially for adults.

That is part of the immigrant experience that can prove challenging — Fitzpatrick acknowledges that for some of the refugees, especially those who came without much English facility, coming to Long Island is probably not unlike landing on Mars.

Other sisters concur.

"It's a wonderful relationship we [the sisters] have with the refugees, but we know it's a struggle for them in a new country," Burke said.

In a written evaluation of the program, the sisters noted the need for "benchmarks" in evaluating progress for the arrivals but realize that success can mean different things for different persons and families.

"Many refugees suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and a lack of hope," Burke said, who also noted the challenges the refugees faced in even getting to the United States. One family, for example, journeyed from Ukraine to Moldova, then Poland, Turkey and Mexico before arriving in the United States.

For such families, learning English is at the top of priorities, but so are completing vocational training programs and advancing children in school. Also important: establishing a modest savings account and eventually gaining mastery of job skills and, of course, securing a steady job with benefits. And all of these have to be done in complying with federal immigration rules.

Though there is no set timeline, a key goal for the arrivals is to eventually leave the campus and live independently. But for now, all are asked to stay on campus at least one year.

As for cultural and religious differences between the refugees and their hosts, Fitzpatrick said that, particularly in the case of the Afghans, who come from a predominantly Muslim

country, the arrivals really "don't know much about nuns."

"But they do know what motivates us," she said, "and they know they are safe."

True enough. Hussain Shams said, "The sisters are really angels."

But the sisters, too, have had to work around limitations and challenges — none of the sisters speak Ukrainian or any of the languages common in Afghanistan, such as Urdu.

Using translation and online apps on smartphones have helped everyone, though Fitzpatrick said small gestures are always appreciated.

"The shortest distance between two people," she said, "is a smile."

Smiles not only help, they promote the crossing of boundaries, something known by some of the congregation's older members who are tutoring the new arrivals.

"An older nun in a wheelchair is capable of teaching conversational English," Fitzpatrick said. "That gives them a sense of hope and purpose — that they still have something to give."

Something to give. To Fitzpatrick and the other sisters, it's about that and applying the Gospel mandate to welcome the newcomer.

"For me," Fitzpatrick said, "it's front and center of what God asks of us."

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**Chris Herlinger** is international correspondent to Global Sisters Report and also writes on humanitarian and international issues for NCR. He has reported from South Sudan and Darfur, Sudan, as well as numerous other locales, including Haiti, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Israel and the Occupied Territories, Kenya and Ethiopia and Liberia. He is the co-author, with Paul Jeffrey, of books on Haiti and Darfur, published by Seabury, and a third, on global hunger, published in 2015.



Anna Konovalova shows a photo from Ukraine on her phone. She is in constant touch with family back in Ukraine. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)



From left to right, refugees Tamana Sayed and Saliha Shams, both from Afghanistan, and Sr. Annelle Fitzpatrick, director of the refugee resettlement program on the campus of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood, New York. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)



People protest in N'Djamena, Chad, on April 27, 2021, after Mahamat Idriss Déby declared himself the head of the country's Transitional Military Council. (AP/Sunday Alamba)

## COLUMN

# Ministering in Chad, a country plagued by violence, unrest and conflict



by

**JULIETTE  
N'GUÉMTA  
NAKOYE MANNTA**

**CHAD** — September 28, 2023

I have lived my whole life in Chad, a country in the Sahel region of Africa. Chad gained international attention in 2001 when the 6 million-year-old skull of a hominid was discovered. I currently live in a community in N'Djamena, the capital of Chad. In Chadian Arabic, N'Djamena means the “city of rest” or “peace.”

Although the name calls for peace, it is, unfortunately, like other cities of our country, a scene of violence and corruption. The current mode of leadership incites unspeakable injustices, including rape and abuses of all kinds.

I was raised a Catholic and eventually became a Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The sisters worked in our parish, and I was drawn to their way of life.

My father was a veterinarian, and my mother was a social worker. They raised me to be an open and inclusive woman. Our family name, N'guémta, means a mission—a vocation to love universally, seeing every person as brother, sister, father, mother and neighbor.

Being a sister has helped me continue this family mission of addressing the numerous challenges in our beloved country. This calling impels me to embrace the challenge of being a Christian prophet—bearing witness and proclaiming God's message of love and inclusion through my daily life, especially during times of conflict.

We identify as a democratic country, but in reality, we live in a police state. Chadian-style

democracy claims the power to veto the life and death of its citizens.

The violence that broke out in October 2022 illustrates this abuse of power. However, violence began in April 2021 when Mahamat Idriss Déby declared himself the head of the Transitional Military Council following the death of his father, who had been in power since 1990.

Déby promised there would be free, fair, and credible elections by October 2022. When it became clear that this would not happen, people began to protest. These actions threatened the government because they didn't know who was organizing the protests.

The security forces of our nation, tasked with protecting the population, responded to the protests by firing live ammunition and tear gas at young, peaceful demonstrators who were only waving tree branches as they marched but were wrongly accused of having weapons.

Many reports documented the killings, with estimates suggesting that the military killed dozens of these youths and injured hundreds in an unprecedented massacre. This event was followed by three months of manhunts, extrajudicial executions, arbitrary arrests, and imprisonment of adults, youth and children in Koro Toro prison.

It was a political ploy that allowed violence of all kinds, including the ransacking of the headquarters of the party of our former prime minister, Albert Pahimi Padacké. However, the blame for these actions was shifted onto the organizers of the protest, the opposition, Waki Tamma, and other political parties.

Our religious community suffered these traumas physically, psychologically, morally and spiritually. We endured the violence in our very flesh. Some of us had difficulty breathing, and our eyes were burned from the gas that was pumped at us. We were all filled with fear, anger, and a deep sense of powerlessness in the face of such injustice.

Despite being deeply demoralized by all of this, we stood before God in an attitude of ardent prayer, keeping our faith, charity and hope. In contrast, the transitional government, which had taken control of the country with promises to organize a "Sovereign and Inclusive National Dialogue," revealed itself as a warlord.

The trauma only intensified as Chadian radio and television broadcast erroneous "official" reports about what had happened — an attempt to sway national and international opinion in favor of the new transitional government. In the

name of easing tensions that could lead to civil war in Chad, both national and international opinions colluded with this government's agenda by turning a blind eye to the truth.

Since January of this year, instability has been steadily increasing. We have seen a growing number of refugees from the Central African Republic, Sudan and Niger, along with political and climate refugees from neighboring countries. Internally, there is more land conflict and violence between herders and farmers, and hunger has also escalated.

There are fears that Chad risks tipping into more violence similar to Sudan, as we observe tanks and petrol leaving Chad for Sudan.

Alongside these political conflicts, households also experience instability because of religious issues. Despite our country's constitution protecting religious freedom, with over half of the population practicing Islam and just under half practicing various forms of Christianity, including a minority of Catholics, interreligious marriages frequently lead to conflict.

One example is that of a Catholic Asian woman I know well. She entered into an arranged marriage with a Chadian Muslim man who was a student in her country. Upon moving back to Chad, she discovered that due to some discrepancy over the payment of the required dowry, the marriage had been fraudulently arranged.

The ensuing conflict between the two families resulted in frequent spousal abuse by the husband and insistence that the couple's 3-year-old daughter undergo female genital mutilation in his family's village. The woman resisted this demand, fled and filed for a civil divorce, which she won.

However, this civil action did not exempt her from their interpretation of Islamic religious law and practice, which recognizes the validity of the marriage and grants her husband ownership over her and her daughter. Without her husband's permission, she cannot leave Chad to return to her own country, and so she currently lives with her daughter in a shelter without support. This conflict appears unsolvable.

Life in conflict is painful and discouraging, and women and children bear the brunt of its many forms. We sisters do our best to support them and many others who are vulnerable. We believe in our mission to live in love and hope, continuing to trust in God, who has been with us all these years through times of conflict and peace.

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**N'guémta Nakoye Mannta (Juliette)** is a Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus from Chad. In addition to an academic background in systematic theology, philosophy, ethics, politics and society, she also has professional training in psychology to accompany the perpetrators and victims of violence, terrorism and natural disasters. She teaches high school and does vocation and pastoral work for the N'Djamena Archdiocese. A writer and activist, she also provides psychological support for women and minors in the Klessoum prison in N'Djamena.



A woman begs on a street in N'Djamena, Chad, on April 26, 2021.

(AP/Sunday Alamba)





Mohamed Santigie Bangura, 45, shows off the scars of the injuries he sustained during the 1991-2002 civil war in Sierra Leone. Since the end of the civil war, religious sisters have been helping survivors and perpetrators deal with trauma and bringing them together to forgive each other and reconcile. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

## Sisters foster healing for survivors and perpetrators of Sierra Leone's civil war



by GSR international correspondent

**DOREEN AJIAMBO**

**MAKENI, SIERRA LEONE** — October 23, 2023

In the leafy suburbs of Oslo Amputee Camp in this northern town in Sierra Leone, a three-hour drive from the capital city of Freetown, survivors and perpetrators of the 1991-2002 civil war live side by side as neighbors and even friends.

Here, Maria Tu Sesay and her neighbor, Amara Sahr Kemba, have become best friends. But 21 years ago, at the height of the country's civil war that killed an estimated 70,000 people and displaced roughly 2.6 million people — more than half the population at the time — Kemba and a group of rebel soldiers murdered Sesay's family, raped her, cut off her toes, and left her for dead.

"Sesay has been able to forgive me, and we shake hands and communicate daily," said 40-year-old Kemba, a former child soldier whom a rebel group forcibly recruited into their ranks when he was 13. "When I met her during reconciliation sessions and knelt, cried and begged her for forgiveness, she forgave me. I told her I felt bad how my actions that I did unknowingly, or was forced to do, affected people."

On her part, Sesay told Global Sisters Report, "I have now forgiven Kemba and others and am sure that is what God wants, too. I don't feel bad at all. I pray for Sierra Leone always to remain peaceful. Hate is not good. There are bigger things in life than what happened in the past, and now life has to go on."

Sesay and Kemba are among hundreds of thousands of survivors and perpetrators who have benefited from religious sisters and other organizations fostering healing and reconciliation in various communities in Sierra Leone since the 11-year-long civil war was officially declared over on Jan. 18, 2002.

During the bloody civil war in this West African nation of more than 8 million people, Foday Saybana Sankoh, the founder and leader of the Sierra Leone rebel group Revolutionary United Front, or RUF, launched a brutal civil war in March 1991, from the east of the country near the border with Liberia to overthrow the government of then-President Joseph Saidu Momoh. Sankoh had the backing of the Liberian warlord (and later president) Charles Taylor.

Observers have reported that indeed, Taylor, who was Sankoh's close friend, having trained together in Libya at one of Moammar Gadhafi's training camps for fledgling revolutionary movements on the continent, provided weapons and ammunition to the RUF rebels during their fighting in Sierra Leone.

This civil war resulted in human rights violations. Sankoh's RUF forcibly recruited and used thousands of child soldiers. They killed and injured civilians, cutting off limbs, lips and ears with machetes. According to one report, an estimated 27,000 people suffered amputations or were disabled during the civil war. The RUF raped women, robbed families, and looted homes, businesses and medical facilities, according to Human Rights Watch.

"The main cause of the war was the selfish interests in the diamonds and the dictatorship from the president at that time," observed Sr. Elizabeth Onwuama of the Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary, who witnessed the civil war in the initial stages before she fled for safety in 1994 to Guinea and finally to Nigeria. According to GlobalData, the West African nation was the world's eighth largest producer of diamonds in 2022, with output up by 7% in 2021. "Some of the soldiers didn't like how the president was running the country at the time."

Onwuama explained that Taylor's involvement in the war was to take control of Sierra Leone's diamond mines. "Those who sponsored the war were interested in the diamonds, and that's why when they came, they established themselves in areas that are rich in diamonds," she said.

The Nigerian-born nun also noted that the extreme suffering of people from lack of development, poverty, hunger, and poor health acted as a catalyst for civil war.

"At the time, people were not receiving salaries, and the civil servants were also agitated by the situation," she explained, noting that she "worked in a government school for six months just before the war, and we had not been paid for all those months."



Maria Tu Sesay recounts the horrific experience she went through at the hands of rebel soldiers during the civil war in Sierra Leone that lasted from 1991 to 2002. Through the reconciliation efforts of religious sisters, she has been able to forgive her attackers. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)



Amara Sahr Kemba, 40, a former child soldier, narrates how he used to kill people under the orders of rebel commanders during the civil war in Sierra Leone from 1991-2002. He has benefited from religious sisters' peacebuilding program to help survivors and perpetrators recover from the deep hurts and divisions caused by the conflict. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)



Residents of Oslo Amputee Camp in Makeni, a town in northern Sierra Leone, attend one of the religious sisters' sessions on peace, healing, and reconciliation, Sept. 19. After the end of the war in 2002, religious sisters in Sierra Leone have been carrying out sessions on forgiveness and reconciliation. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)



Sr. Elizabeth Onwuama of the Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary witnessed the civil war before she fled in 1994 for safety to Guinea and Nigeria. After the civil war was officially declared over in 2002, Onwuama returned with other sisters and began to help survivors and perpetrators recover from trauma. They also promoted forgiveness and reconciliation. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)



One of the amputees at Oslo Amputee Camp in Makeni, a town in northern Sierra Leone, joins his family during a session on peace, healing, and reconciliation organized by religious sisters. The sisters have been visiting homes, villages, and other gatherings nationwide to carry out sessions on forgiveness and reconciliation since the end of the civil war in 2002. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

### Seeking forgiveness

When the civil war ended in 2002, Onwuama and dozens of religious sisters from different congregations who had fled the country returned to assess the situation with the aim of continuing with their ministries, which included working as child care workers, nurses, educators, parish ministers, social workers, chaplains, and spiritual directors.

“After the war, so many people I knew had been killed, and others were amputated,” lamented Onwuama, admitting that the war had left an enduring scar on the nation and the collective psyche. “The stories I heard from victims were traumatic to me. Some women told me how they dropped their babies along the way because they couldn’t run with them. Some handed their babies to others while others killed them.”

Onwuama and the other sisters wanted to make a change.

The sisters started visiting victims of the civil war in Makeni and other towns throughout the country where the government and aid agencies had built houses after the war so that Sierra Leone’s estimated 27,000 amputees and other victims had somewhere to live.

The sisters met victims in their homes, churches, and other gatherings, asking them to rebuild and forgive the injustices committed against them by rebel soldiers and even government troops.

“We always prayed and shared the word of God with victims of the war wherever we met them,” said Sr. Teresa McKeon of the St. Joseph of Cluny congregation. “We told them that unless they forgive each other, there is no guarantee that there will never be another war.”

McKeon, an Irish missionary, stayed in Sierra Leone during the civil war and helped the injured who had been shot or

amputated and left on the streets for dead to get food and medication. When she left the country briefly in 1994, the nun served in Guinea until 2001, where she worked with Sierra Leonean refugee women, children under 5, and young girls in several refugee camps.

The nun was recently granted Sierra Leonean citizenship by the government in recognition of her work, including during the civil war.

“During our forgiveness campaigns, we told victims that to avoid the recurrence of whatever was happening, they had to forgive,” she recalled, saying that their message resonated with the victims. “The process was slow because you cannot force someone to forgive. It had to come from the heart. You just have to do your best, and God will do the rest.”

The survivors agreed with the religious sisters, saying the path to forgiveness was not easy without God’s intervention. The survivors told GSR that the nuns used to invite them to the trauma healing and community dialogue sessions. They received counseling and learned about forgiveness.

“I was very angry and not ready to forgive anyone who murdered my family, shot my leg and left me for dead,” said the 45-year-old Mohamed Santigie Bangura, whose leg had to be medically amputated. “But when sisters came to my house and talked about forgiveness, the message started to sink deep into my heart, and I began to feel better. They kept encouraging me to move forward with life and forgive my offenders.”

Bangura noted that although the religious sisters’ ministries are rooted in Catholic beliefs, the nuns have assisted survivors and perpetrators in healing and recovery regardless of their race, religion, or ethnicity. The country’s statistics from 2020 show that 77% of the population is Muslim and 22% Christian.



Mohamed Santigie Bangura, 45, whose leg was amputated after he was shot in the leg by the rebel soldiers during Sierra Leone's civil war, narrates how religious sisters have helped him heal from trauma and reconcile with his attackers. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)



Sr. Teresa McKeon of the St Joseph of Cluny congregation narrates how she and the other sisters have helped survivors and perpetrators of the civil war in Sierra Leone reconcile and heal from trauma. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

## Pursuing reconciliation and reintegration

After months of preaching forgiveness, the sisters began visiting child soldiers in the rehabilitation centers in Freetown and other towns, seeking to heal trauma and bring together victims and perpetrators to unite and reconcile.

The sisters said their program was meant to bring together RUF soldiers and survivors to share their painful experiences and discuss issues of conflict and contention. Through these conversations, the sisters said people were encouraged to forgive each other, to reconcile and rebuild their broken relationships.

McKeon said during their regular visits, some child soldiers admitted to their crimes after the sisters counseled them and shared the word of God, a message that at first “came as a mockery to some, but slowly, they began to accept that God is the one who saved them.”

Kemba said he was able to confess to his involvement in the civil war after the sisters took him through trauma counseling and testimonial therapy. He said the program helped Sesay meet him and four others who played a role in killing her family members.

“One day, the sisters took us to the outskirts of Freetown to meet a group of survivors. During the discussion, one woman spotted me as one of the people who had participated in killing her husband,” Kemba recalled, referring to Sesay. “She started shouting at me, and everyone turned to look at me. I was afraid and shaken. I was lost in thought on what to do, and I started crying as I stepped outside the hall.”

Kemba said the sisters took him and Sesay outside the hall, and they started counseling them, asking them to forgive each other and reconcile.

“God loves us all equally, and if God can forgive us no matter the wrongs we do every day, we should also follow his example and forgive others,” Sesay said sisters told her, prompting her to forgive Kemba.

“Despite the pain, I was able to forgive him, and we shook hands,” said Sesay. “He also apologized for killing my husband and the bad things he had done to other people, and now we live peacefully.”

For the last two decades since the civil war ended, Onwuama said the sisters have built peace and healing between survivors and perpetrators through forgiveness in the face of pain and trauma.

“We have also been able to reintegrate thousands of child soldiers after doing trauma healing because many had been rejected in society by their victims,” said Onwuama, noting that the church had for a very long time been providing funds to build houses and install wells for child soldiers, amputees, and other victims.

Today, sisters have established schools throughout the country as a way of preventing future conflict. Onwuama said education is critical in fostering lasting peace as it enables children to access and understand information, analyze it, and make sound decisions.

“The thought of starting schools came as an aftermath of war because if you look back during the war, many people joined it because they were not educated,” she said. “They didn’t even know what they were fighting for. I believe that once you educate society, people will have a chance to think for themselves and make sound decisions.”

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**Doreen Ajiambo** is the Africa/Middle East correspondent for Global Sisters Report based in Kenya. She covers the missions and ministries of Catholic women religious and writes about humanitarian and environmental issues across sub-Saharan Africa that affect the people they serve. Her previous work has been published by Religion News Service, Catholic News Service, Refugees Deeply, USA Today and the Global Post, among other outlets.



A man pulls a cart of recycled material past a mural that says “From the heart comes peace” in Bogotá, Colombia, Nov. 22. Though 2016 peace accords put an end to the decadeslong conflict between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the government, Colombia’s poorest, many in rural communities, still suffer violence, said Dominican Sr. Diana Herrera Castañeda. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

## In Colombia’s conflict, women religious provide ‘opportunities for life’



by  
**RHINA GUIDOS**

**BOGOTÁ, COLOMBIA** — December 26, 2023

Sr. Diana Herrera Castañeda still remembers those tense weekends from her childhood in Bogotá.

“It was the time of Pablo Escobar,” Herrera said. “I was about 9 years old. On Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays, starting at three or four in the afternoon, one could hear bombs everywhere. And you were at home — with your parents, with uncles — always in fear.”

The concern was even greater if a family member was away from home.

Years later, as an adult and a sister of the Congregation of St. Catherine of Siena, she realized that what others suffered at that time had been much worse than the anguish that permeated the city.

“It’s very different when you hear the story of the people from [rural areas], where they were displaced,” she said. “I had the opportunity, seven years ago, to work with two associations of peasant women. ... They told how their mothers would hide them at night to prevent the illegal armed group from [taking] and raping them and [from] taking their sons away as recruits.”

Now, as an academic, Herrera studies the role of religious sisters in Colombia’s more than 50-year conflict.

“One begins to find that female religious life has played a very important role in



Dominican Sr. Diana Herrera Castañeda explained on Nov. 22 in Bogotá, Colombia, the role women religious have played in the country's peace process. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)



A visitor to the Center of Memory, Peace and Reconciliation in Bogotá, Colombia, walks Nov. 22 past an installation of vials filled with soil from the country's towns and cities that suffered violence during the decadeslong conflict between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the government. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)



Left: Gloria Alvarado stands on Nov. 22 next to a photo of her only son, who was assassinated, and whose killing and its consequences is now part of an exhibit at the Center of Memory, Peace and Reconciliation in Bogotá, Colombia. Right: Alvarado explained to GSR the work of art that depicts how her eyes could not have seen the danger her son was under. She said no one has taken responsibility for his killing. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

accompaniment, and above all, accompaniment in the most violent places, where people expressed resistance,” said Herrera in an interview with Global Sisters Report in Bogotá Nov. 22. “It is a story that I feel has remained silent and hidden.”

Perhaps religious sisters have not been present at the dialogue tables between opposition groups, like members of the church hierarchy have in Colombia, something that resulted in the signing of peace agreements in 2016. But with their ministries and presence in towns that suffered near and far from the capital, nuns have contributed to the peace process in an intimate way, Herrera said.

On many occasions, they have taught others “to see this moment of pain, of anguish, in a different way, to redefine it through productive projects,” she said.

In some places, women religious have helped recover the historical memory of what happened in areas that suffered disproportionately from the war and, in some cases, where the conflict still lingers.

In places like Chocó, Antioquia, and Granada, sisters, through sewing and baking projects, have given victims the opportunity to channel their pain, or physically participate in an activity that helps them meditate, then talk and heal from their losses, from the abuse. Sometimes, for the sisters, that takes the form of sitting down to participate in a craft and reaching out to people who haven't been able to talk about their traumas before, Herrera said.

“You sit down to sew with [the person]. And it is very beautiful because then sewing is not simply an activity. ... It's taking the portraits of missing persons and crocheting them, taking the name of a missing person and decorating it with flowers or symbols,” Herrera said.

And in Colombia, stories of pain and violence, and people who need healing, abound.

In some places, such as the Center for Memory, Peace, and Reconciliation in Bogotá, you can hear stories of the war, such as that of Gloria Inés Alvarado. Her eyes still sparkle when she sees the photo of her beloved son, Luis Alejandro Concha Alvarado. He was an extraordinary violinist, Alvarado said, focused, at the age of 23, on his philosophy studies at the Free University of Bogotá. He was days away from leaving for Paris, where he had received a scholarship to continue his studies.

“I don't think my son was perfect, but he was extraordinary as a human being, as a person, as a family member, as a companion,” Alvarado said, contemplating his image in the middle of an exhibit, Nov. 22, that included photos of her family. “But the news that broke worldwide on April 16, 2006, alleged that my son was a terrorist.”

For his mother, Luis not only became another victim of the armed conflict that day, but also a victim of the state's lies.

Government officials suggested to members of the press that Luis and three other students, who died with him during an explosion in the building where his family lived, were assembling explosives to help the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, known as FARC, in conflict with the government at that time.

Despite the insinuations, officials never presented evidence



Two men read the text of letters written by those who knew victims of Colombia's civil conflict, while walking the grounds of the Center of Memory, Peace and Reconciliation in Bogotá Nov. 22. The letters express the pain of those who suffered the loss of their loved ones or who don't know, decades after their disappearance, what happened to them. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

nor investigated the incident, she said. The only thing they did was sow doubt and pain for the family, as well as for thousands of Colombians who still seek answers about the deaths and disappearances that transpired during the conflict.

Illustrating the pain that many like Alvarado carry with them day after day, the final report of the Truth Commission (published in 2022) revealed what “women had to witness,” Herrera said. “How they entered their homes, killed their husbands, took their sons, and raped their daughters. ... And not only the illegal groups. Unfortunately, the army also took part in all this.”

What is not disclosed, Herrera said, is the dedication of many religious sisters during those times, some of whom have been very visible, such as the case of Sr. Maritze Trigos Torres, a Dominican Sister of the Presentation.

Trigos, a human rights defender for more than 30 years in different places of conflict in Colombia, speaks in a 2019 YouTube interview about her “option for the one who needs the most, for the one whose human rights have been violated.”

Trigos “helped teach people how to exercise their right to petition, taught people how justice works in Colombia, and [how to] speak up,” Herrera said. “She was part of a search unit for a group of missing people and went to help find the bodies of the people who’d been killed.”

Herrera said there are also cases of sisters like Yolanda Cerón, of the Company of Mary, shot dead by paramilitaries in September 2001 in front of a church in the urban area of Tumaco, Nariño, situated in southwestern Colombia.

Like Trigos, Cerón saw the need to join the resistance and helped those around her, many of them Afro-Colombian and Indigenous, to defend themselves, Herrera said.

“Illegal gangs are emerging, as well as drug trafficking groups ... and so they had to denounce the Colombian state,

and that was when the whole mess began because the state itself began to go against them,” Herrera said.

During the toughest days of the coronavirus pandemic, when many activities were carried out virtually, Herrera had the opportunity to listen to reconciliation talks from a region accompanied by sisters during the conflict, she said. She heard stories of what she calls “accompaniment in silence” from sisters who visited families, who were with them in mourning the death or disappearance of a loved one, or how they helped people escape clandestinely.

“There are religious communities who hid people in their homes, in their convents, in their communities, so that they could escape” and survive, she said.

She also heard about a community of women religious who dedicated themselves to single mothers-to-be so that they would not have abortions, as some did not want to give birth amid the conflict.

“They took them in and said, ‘No. Come. We’ll give you support, but don’t abort,’ “ and they accompanied them, even when the time to give the child up for adoption came.

Colombia continues to have problems despite having signed peace agreements. The war, in some places, for the poor and distant and rural towns and cities, is still going on, Herrera said. So the sisters’ work also continues.

“That is where religious life begins to make more sense, from its social side, to say, ‘Our task is to listen, to help people find their way, not so much to heal, but to help them see that there are other opportunities, for life,’ “ and proving that life, no matter what happens, can go on, she said.

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**Rhina Guidos** is the Latin America regional correspondent for Global Sisters Report. She previously was a reporter and editor for Catholic News Service in Washington, D.C., and has worked at several U.S. newspapers. Guidos is the author of *Rutilio Grande: A Table for All*, about a Jesuit priest martyred in her native El Salvador. Follow her on Twitter at @rhina\_guidos.



At a memorial site at the hospital in Vukovar, Croatia, Srs. Doroteja Krešić, right, and Teuta Augustini, say a prayer for Saša Molnar, the brother of Sr. Franciska Molnar and a victim of a 1991 massacre. The women are Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross. (GSR Photo/Chris Herlinger)

## 30 years after war in Croatia, sisters still healing wounds



by  
**CHRIS HERLINGER**

**VUKOVAR, CROATIA** — December 28, 2023

Before the “Homeland War” of the 1990s, the residents of Vukovar, Croatia, thought it a peaceful city. But a devastating tragedy interceded — and three decades later, the city lives in an uneasy peace, shrouded in memories of horrific tragedy and loss.

One of those who knows of such loss is Sr. Franciska Molnar, 68, a member of the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross, who ministers at the congregation’s home convent in Đakovo, a city about 35 miles west of Vukovar.

Molnar grew up in Vukovar, a port city on the Danube which overlooks the border with neighboring Serbia. She recalls it as a place where people got along. Residents did not think much of the mixing of Orthodox Serbs and Catholic Croatians — though the Croatian majority was conscious that, during the communist era, Catholics were often not favored for jobs.

Peaceful dynamics changed swiftly, however, when Croatia declared independence from Yugoslavia in 1991 and the Yugoslav National Army, which included Serbian extremists, opposed the move, invading the country. Eventually Croatia won its war of independence but not before some 20,000 perished.

A fulcrum of the struggle was the fall of Vukovar in November 1991 after a nearly-three month siege. The city became the first European municipality to be totally destroyed since





The National Memorial Cemetery in Vukovar, Croatia, commemorates the victims of the Croatian War of Independence, called the Homeland War by Croatians. (GSR Photo/Chris Herlinger)

World War II, and was the site of numerous human rights violations against civilians. Witnesses at the time said that dozens of bodies lined Vukovar's ash- and debris-covered streets.

But perhaps notoriously, Yugoslav national forces forcibly took some 400 people from Vukovar's hospital — an institution founded by Molnar's congregation in 1940, though later confiscated after World War II by communist authorities.

Eventually about half of those were released — including a group of Catholic sisters — but others were transported to a farm outside the city and were executed. Some remain missing to this day; the bodies of others were found nearly a decade later in mass graves.

Among those who perished was Molnar's brother, Saša. He was 26 at the time and serving with Croatian forces. He was the father of two young children.

"He was defending his country," Molnar said quietly in an interview at the congregation's convent in Đakovo.

Molnar, who was not in Vukovar during the siege, said her parents stubbornly held onto hope that their son would return — sometimes even laying out clothes for him. When Saša's body was discovered in a mass grave nine years later, the family was devastated.

Molnar's own journey has not been easy, but she has been able to forgive her brother's killers. "I am open to all people, and even to those who killed my brother," she said.

But Molnar underlines that belief with what she says is a truth about forgiveness: She says the act of forgiveness does not emanate from her, but from God.

"I feel it is God's grace that I can forgive," she said. "I feel that it is important to live by the Gospel, God's word. That's God's gift, God's work."

"The experience of forgiving helps me in my life, in the work I do," she said, which includes helping supervise a sister-run food bank in Đakovo. But she adds, "It's not always easy."

## 1990s Wars in Europe

- The wars in the former Yugoslavia that began in 1991 resulted in the deaths of more than 140,000 people and prompted the displacement of some 4 million others, according to the International Center for Transitional Justice.
- The 1991-1999 wars came about in the wake of the dissolution of a federation of six republics, often said to be held together under the leadership of Yugoslav President Josip Tito, who died in 1980, according to a BBC news summary,
- With Tito's death and the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union, the Yugoslav republics began seeking autonomy. The first republics to do so included Croatia — prompting the Serb-dominated Yugoslav army "to lash out." Thousands were killed in Croatia's war of independence. Croatia had a Catholic majority and a Serb (Orthodox) minority.
- Bosnia and Herzegovina — "with a complex mix of Serbs, Muslims and Croats" — also sought independence, prompting reaction from the Serb minority. Yugoslav army units were renamed the Bosnian Serb Army and "carved out a huge swathe of Serb-dominated territory." More than 1 million Bosnian Muslims and Croats "were driven from their homes in ethnic cleansing," though Serbs also suffered in the war.
- The most remembered event of the war in Bosnia was likely the 1992-96 siege of the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo.
- The Bosnian war ended in 1995 with the U.S.-brokered peace agreement known as the Dayton Accords. The final war in the region, between ethnic Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo, ended in 1999 with a Serb defeat.
- Though often referred to in the U.S. as the Balkans war or wars, each country tends to have a name for their respective war — such as, in Croatia, "The Homeland War" or the "Croatian War of Independence."



Evidence of bombardment at a hospital in Vukovar, Croatia, remains as part of a museum to commemorate events there. (GSR Photo/Chris Herlinger)



At a memorial site at the hospital in Vukovar, Croatia, a plaque commemorates Saša Molnar, the brother of Sr. Franciska Molnar, one of the victims of a 1991 massacre. (GSR Photo/Chris Herlinger)



Posters at an exhibit in Vukovar, Croatia, commemorate the siege of the city in 1991. (GSR Photo/Chris Herlinger)

## ‘Wounds that are still fresh’

Molnar’s comments echo those of more than a dozen sisters interviewed earlier this month in Croatia and neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina about both the fallout from the wars of 30 years ago and about their current ministries that are helping, in often small ways, both directly and indirectly, to heal the wounds of lands once riven by conflict.

The sisters were not hesitant in discussing the 1990s wars — both those who experienced them as adults directly and those who were children at the time.

The women religious stressed that meaningful lessons can be drawn from the wars, particularly the need to forgive a nation’s enemies and to remain close to people in need during conflict. But at the same time, the sister’s focus now is on ministries that may have little direct connection to the past.

“The war is behind us; a new generation is coming,” said Sr. Rastislava Ralbovsky, who is also a member of Molnar’s congregation. “Our apostolate is focused on the needs of people now.”

Yet, she said, “There are still effects felt by those who suffered.”

That is true. To an outsider it is hard to miss that, even from a distance of three decades, the shadows of war are still discernible.

A surprising number of buildings damaged or destroyed by war still mark the landscape in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina — whether an abandoned train station in Vukovar, or, in Bosnia, burned-out houses in graceful snow-swept plateaus or still recovering hamlets.

While traveling by car with sisters in Croatia near the Bosnian border, one religious casually noted that, during the war, “this was a Serb-controlled area, out of Croatian control.” Others mentioned that some sisters lost convents and even their lives in the war.

Of course, visiting Vukovar — whether in the memorial established in the basement of the still intact and operational hospital, or at the national gravesite for the victims of the Vukovar massacre — is something altogether different.

The weight of events there circle around everything, exposing vulnerabilities. Vukovar was rebuilt, but by several accounts has never fully regained its pre-war prosperity or footing: Its population dropped from about 46,000 in 1991 to 23,000 in 2021.

On a recent visit to Vukovar, Srs. Doroteja Krešić and Teuta Augustini, fellow members of Molnar’s congregation, found a plaque with Saša Molnar’s name at the hospital memorial and said a brief prayer; that moment of avowed respect was a salve in a place of painful historical memory.

“What happened here was pure evil,” Augustini said.

Earlier, Krešić recalled family traumas from the war



Sr. Rastislava Ralbovsky, right, and Sr. Marija Klara Klarić, members of the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross, minister in a program that began in 1996 to help people coping with trauma and spiritual scars after the war. The program is based at the congregational convent in Đakovo, Croatia. (GSR Photo/Chris Herlinger)



The abandoned railroad station in Vukovar, Croatia, destroyed during a 1991 siege, is evidence of destruction during the Croatian War of Independence. (GSR Photo/Chris Herlinger)

— whether it was an uncle who was assaulted by Yugoslav soldiers or the family home being damaged by a military assault. “People always said the war won’t last long,” she recalled, acknowledging that that is something that is always said when wars begin, whether the World Wars, the wars in Croatia and Bosnia or the current war in Ukraine.

On the issue of forgiveness, Krešić said she finds solace and strength in the Gospel of Luke’s reference to Jesus saying, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

But, like Molnar, she says that belief is not simply or glibly said and embraced easily. Krešić knows of a woman who was raped during the war, prompting to ask herself, “Could I forgive if I were from Vukovar?”

It is a poignant question — she said she feels “very close to those people and what they experienced.” She said it is understandable that for many people, particularly those of her parents’ age, it is not easy to forgive the aggressors.

“For many people, the war isn’t finished,” Krešić said. “There are wounds that are still fresh.”

Two sisters who know that well are Sr. Rastislava Ralbovsky and Sr. Marija Klara Klarić. Both are members of the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross who minister in a program that began in 1996 to help people coping with trauma and spiritual scars after the war — be they veterans, war widows, or those who lost children.

The program was an outgrowth of the congregation’s work in housing refugees from neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. It has since expanded to assist people with physical and mental disabilities, and it attracts Catholics of all ages needing spiritual sustenance.

Though Đakovo was not occupied, the sisters’ convent was

filled with refugees, and personal contact was important, with the sisters providing accommodation, food and spiritual care, whether that meant prayer or daily praying the rosary.

“It was a very dear, precious experience,” Ralbovsky said, “to share someone’s suffering, to show that we were here, to do what we could do at that moment.”

The sisters welcomed all, regardless of faith or nationality. And the sisters remain welcoming now — attentive to needs that include struggles with post-traumatic stress syndrome, a common concern with wives of veterans.

The wives are open to discussing their problems with the sisters — the men usually are not. “It’s hard to reach those men (with PTSD),” Ralbovsky said. “It’s like they are closed. They are still suffering, and their wives are still suffering.”

The effects are still present and can manifest themselves in chemical addictions, depression and spousal abuse. “We try to assist the families we best we can,” Ralbovsky said, adding, “It’s a small drop in the sea of what we can do, of what should be done.”

It is obvious, she said, that many families are still struggling and “very much in need of recovery.” Sometimes it can feel like the needs are too overwhelming. And yet, Ralbovsky also knows there are men and families who have recovered — who come out of the experience renewed and hopeful.

Klarić said it is difficult to take in all the complexity and convergent issues related to war recovery. While some who are able “to put the war aside” even those who may be willing to talk about it some may face specific challenges — the experience of a combatant may not be the same as that of people imprisoned or tortured in a prison camp.

War anniversaries — even ones that are celebratory — can prompt moments of pain. “The effects of war are still

there,” said Klarić, who lived in occupied Bosnia for six months and who left the country in the midst of war with her mother, sisters and brothers, arriving in Croatia in 1992. “Time makes it a little bit easier, but it can never heal fully. The scar always remains visible.”

### ‘They had to process that pain’

She and Ralbovsky take solace in knowing that whatever work they do helps people in any stage of recovery, “People are free in front of us — they trust us, believe in our vocations,” Klarić said. “They feel God’s closeness through us.”

In their ongoing program to assist people with spiritual needs and challenges, the sisters are guided by the biblical dictum about Jesus serving those who hunger, thirst and are “the least of thee.”

“We have ill people, hungry people, lonely people in our programs, who are seeking love and understanding,” Ralbovsky said. “With our programs, we are trying to achieve the kingdom of God in small ways. That’s a huge source of happiness and joy.”

Both sisters said that, tellingly, those who experienced war firsthand are often the ones who were less prone to make declarations against those on the other side of the war — and perhaps better able to forgive one-time enemies.

“People who experienced trauma had to ‘work spiritually to find the solution in faith’ “ — and that includes sisters, said Ralbovsky.

Those who suffered in the war experienced something like spiritual awakening, Ralbovsky said. “They had to process that pain.”

Sisters aren’t the only ones who believe that sisters in conflict zones have had to fully live their consecration.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Franciscan Fr. Svetozar Kraljević said sisters were “surrounded by death all of the time,” but showed steadfast commitment, care and courage. “Whatever life brings,” he said, “the sisters are there.”

From another angle, Sr. Franka Bagarić, the provincial superior of the school sisters of St. Francis of Christ the King in Mostar, Bosnia, a city that was largely destroyed in the Bosnian war, said the conflict there prompted residents to become hyper-sensitive to religious and ethnic identities — Muslim (Bosnian), Catholic (Croatian) and Orthodox (Serbian). But it also prompted an awareness of a shared communal identity “found in wounds and suffering.”

If that brought some, including sisters, to a deeper spirituality, perhaps “that can do good” to the healing of the nation, she said.

“The wounds are still deep,” she said. “We still need a lot of years of healing and goodwill. Every side needs to give herself to peace.”



Sr. Franka Bagarić is the provincial superior of the school sisters of St. Francis of Christ the King in Mostar, Bosnia, a city that was largely destroyed in the Bosnian war. (GSR Photo/Chris Herlinger)



Sr. Franciska Molnar, 68, a member of the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross, ministers at the congregation’s home convent in Đakovo, a city about 35 miles west of Vukovar. She says she has been able to forgive the killers of her brother Saša, who perished during the Croatian Homeland War. (GSR Photo/Chris Herlinger)



Sr. Tihomira Parlaj is a member of the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul of Zagreb who helps coordinate a soup kitchen in the Croatian capital. Asked about advice for sisters in current and future conflict zones, she said: “Stay with the people, know who they are, be close to them and support the people with the needs they have.” (GSR Photo/Chris Herlinger)

And sisters themselves need to affirm that, wherever the travails of war and conflict occur, they must act with courage and hope and remain in solidarity with those most suffering.

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### Up to God ‘to render justice and judgment’

One sister who never failed in her calling when people needed her is Sr. Damira Biškup, also a member of the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross.

Biškup, 88, a trained nurse, served 25 years at the maternal wing of Vukovar hospital, and stayed there through Vukovar’s fall. “We were surrounded by enemies,” she recalled, and struggled with a lack of electricity, food and water — what little food came in was due to the assistance of humanitarian groups.

While Biškup was not directly threatened with violence, she recalls having to run quickly from the hospital to the nearby convent where she lived, seeing numerous bodies on the streets. “It was very difficult to witness that,” she said.

She and four other sisters were able to leave Vukovar two days after the city’s fall on Nov. 18, 1991, headed eventually to Zagreb, taking with them a premature infant girl Biškup carried in her arms — the girl’s mother couldn’t stay in the hospital during the siege.

“She was very fragile,” Biškup said of the girl, born three months premature. “She needed care.”

A later televised news conference attended by Biškup and the girl eventually helped reunite the infant and her mother. Biškup remains in touch with both the girl, Tanja Šimić, and her mother, Anka — an enduring connection celebrated in Croatian newspapers during 25th anniversary commemorations in 2016 of the events in Vukovar.

She recalls good relations before the war with Serbian doctors at the hospital. She also cherishes memories of small gestures like the Serbian driver leaving the heat on in the bus that took the sisters, the infant and other children overnight to Serbia before heading back to Croatia.

“He was sensitive to the needs of the little babies and children,” Biškup said, brightening to the memory.

Such kindness animates some of her reflections, as does her belief that Croatia is imbued with a deep collective faith. But equally importantly is her own deepening of faith — all of which Biškup reflects on in a 2019 collection of poetry whose title translates roughly into Faith in a Context Without Hope.

The book of 30 poems, compiled and released by a non-religious publisher, is dedicated to Tanja Šimić.

“Nothing now is as it was during the war, nothing as intense,” she said, but adds that it is her hope that the Croatian people will never forget the events of Vukovar.

At the end of a quiet Thursday afternoon at her congregation’s convent in Zagreb, with the setting sun visible through a window, Biškup read from the book, explaining through a translator that one of the poems, “Procession of Memories” affirmed the centrality of Vukovar to Croatian identity.

As for how she has recovered from those times, Biškup said her poetry has helped her find her way, as has affirmation of forgiveness. “We have to forgive because we’re Christians,”



Sr. Tihomira Parlaj, a member of the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul of Zagreb who helps coordinate a soup kitchen in the Croatian capital, is seen here with some of those the kitchen serves. (GSR Photo/Chris Herlinger)



The memorial at the National Memorial Cemetery in Vukovar, Croatia, commemorates the victims of the Croatian War of Independence, called the Homeland War by Croats. (GSR Photo/Chris Herlinger)



Sr. Damira Biškup, a member of the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross, served 25 years at the maternal wing of Vukovar hospital, and stayed there through Vukovar's fall in 1991. She reads from a book of poetry published in 2019 that focuses on the Croatian War of Independence. (GSR Photo/Chris Herlinger)

she said, adding though, “we should leave it to God to render justice and judgment.”

Biškup paused, and reflected on what remains for those who suffered in ways large and small during the wars of 30 years ago.

“Forgive, yes,” she said. “But forget, no.”

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**Chris Herlinger** is international correspondent to Global Sisters Report and also writes on humanitarian and international issues for NCR. He has reported from South Sudan and Darfur, Sudan, as well as numerous other locales, including Haiti, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Israel and the Occupied Territories, Kenya and Ethiopia and Liberia. He is the co-author, with Paul Jeffrey, of books on Haiti and Darfur, published by Seabury, and a third, on global hunger, published in 2015.





# GLOBAL SISTERS REPORT

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Global Sisters Report is an independent, non-profit source of news and information about Catholic sisters and the critical issues facing the people they serve. Our network of journalists report about their lives and works, and sisters write commentary from their perspective.

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