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Information on the situation in Ukraine ahead of the extraordinary collection in European Catholic churches

Vatican City, 22 April 2016 – On Sunday 24 April there will be an extraordinary collection in all the Catholic churches of Europe to support the people of Ukraine. This follows the initiative launched by Pope Francis during the Regina Coeli on 3 April, when from St. Peter's Square he invited all European Catholics to perform a gesture of charity to alleviate the material suffering of Ukrainians, expressing the personal closeness of the Pontiff and all the Church. On the eve of the collection, the Holy See Press Office has issued a detailed communiqué on the current situation in the country.

"The armed conflict in east Ukraine began in spring 2014 and continues despite the ceasefire of September 2015, claiming victims due mostly to the large amount of mines that have not been removed, and by relentless artillery fire. There have been around 9,000 confirmed deaths, to which disappearances and prisoners, often illegally held, must be added. The situation of instability, the unceasing armed threat and the consequent spread of uncontrolled arms groups subject the population to grave hardships, not only in the territories directly affected, but throughout the country. The outlook has worsened as a result of the general economic situation, affected by extreme inflation that has drastically reduced purchasing power; over half a million people are urgently in need of food. There are over one and a half million displaced persons within the country.

In the areas most directly affected, the greatest needs are in the health sector, as more than 120 health care centres have been damaged or destroyed. Expectant mothers are at particular risk, and the likelihood of the spread of AIDS and tuberculosis is significant. Anaesthetic is scarce and operations are often carried out without. Where medicines exist (many pharmacies have been closed), the price of medicine has reached prohibitive levels.

In the regions currently most afflicted by the conflict there currently reside around three million people, in conditions of extreme hardship. The majority are elderly people who are unable to leave the combat zone.

With regard to homes, from 12,000 to 15,000 houses have been damaged, and more than a thousand completely destroyed. The situation is likely to become critical in view of the very low temperatures expected in autumn and winter.

Many children are unable to attend school. 200,000 children have been evacuated to the regions of Ukraine outside the afflicted areas: one child in four is displaced. Many are affected by grave forms of psychological trauma, due to the violence they have witnessed or experienced; some have even lost the ability to read and write.

The state of conflict constitutes the principle difficulty in the search for a solution to the humanitarian crisis. In particular, there are limitations on the importation of commercial goods including medicines, as well as enormous difficulties in facilitating the arrival of international aid to the most troubled areas.

Ukrainian society is reacting by showing its extraordinary capacity for resistance. The best functioning aid network is constituted of religious confessions. These include Catholics who in Ukraine make up around 10 per cent of the population and are a small minority in the most affected area. They are fully mobilised to assist those in need, although their resources are inadequate to face the enormity of the most urgent needs.

The Holy See is preparing specific interventions for the benefit of the entire population, without discrimination on the basis of religion or confession, in order to confront the humanitarian crisis, especially in the most critical areas. Therefore the mechanisms are in preparation for the gathering and selection of projects to be financed via a specific Commission *in loco*, responsible for overseeing them; the Pontifical Council "Cor Unum" will approve and evaluate the technical management of the funds, reporting on its activity as appropriate.
