

Polish border villages reach out to refugees

Communities are opening their doors to people fleeing Ukraine, but resources are already starting to run low

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Until last Wednesday, Pawel Sanocki's biggest concern was lining up deliveries of corn and wheat for the family-owned trucking business he runs on the outskirts of Radymno in eastern Poland.

But when he and his wife saw what was happening in Ukraine, they decided to do something. They turned the four-room office in the company's spacious repair shop into a shelter for refugees. The couple kitted it out with a microwave, a fridge, nine beds, a washing machine and shelves loaded with food. So far they've helped 50 people fleeing Ukraine, mostly young women and children. But the strain is beginning to show. The business has suffered and the Sanockis' finances are running low. They've done this all on their own without any support from the government or charities, and they can't keep it up much longer. "Maybe one month," Mr. Sanocki said.

That kind of stress is building in communities all along Poland's border with Ukraine as the number of people fleeing the Russian invasion soars past one million. So far most of the arrivals have been able to move on to friends or relatives across Europe. But that's beginning to change and more refugees are arriving with nowhere to go and no means to continue their journey.

As the influx keeps swelling, the pressure is being felt keenest in towns such as Radymno, where Mr. Sanocki's and another small shelter are struggling to stay open.

Mr. Sanocki said he and his wife have tried to do all they can for the refugees. They've not only covered the costs of running the shelter, they've also helped refugees arrange transportation to other cities, and they've started looking for permanent accommodation for those who have nowhere to go.

"It's changing," Mr. Sanocki said of the refugees' needs. At first, most stayed a night or two and then headed off to meet family or friends. But now many arrivals don't have family connections and need to



Jaroslav Negrvecki, 63, sits next to his granddaughter. He had helped her and her mother get to a shelter in Radymno, Poland, from their family home near Lviv, and was preparing to head back to Ukraine on Monday. ANNA LIMINOWICZ/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

find somewhere to live. He's tried finding apartments in town, but vacancies are scarce. Meanwhile, his business has ground to a halt and two of his children are sick and need care.

He's thought about crowdfunding or seeking donations. But he backed off after hearing gossip in town that he's profiting from his shelter and out to make money.

Across the street from Mr. Sanocki, a trio of businessmen are facing a similar plight. They rented a former hostel and turned the building's eight rooms into a shelter for around two dozen families. But they too have run short of cash and the owner of the building said if they don't pay up soon, he'll have to kick out the refugees.

Even a priest in a nearby town has had trouble trying to assist. He frantically called Mr. Sanocki on Monday seeking help finding shelter for 1,500 Ukrainian orphans. So far he'd had no luck.

Mr. Sanocki said he can't bear closing down and turning away people who arrive with their families, such as Rozhena Ak-

samtovska. She arrived on Saturday from Kyiv with her mother, daughter and three-month-old baby. She had to leave her husband behind along with her brother and his pregnant wife.

Ms. Aksamtovska, 30, was an architect in Kyiv who designed mansions for upscale clients and dreamed of buying her own house one day. "Now I'm homeless and without work," she said. She's hoping the family can be reunited in Germany eventually but she's scared about starting all over. She can't speak the language and doesn't have her laptop with examples of her work. "Maybe I can only wash floors," she said.

Across the hall, Jaroslav Negrvecki, 63, was saying goodbye to his daughter-in-law and her daughter. He'd helped get them to Radymno on Monday from the family home near Lviv. Now he was heading back to be with his wife. He'd like to stay, he said as tears welled in his eyes, but he has to go back. His daughter and another granddaughter have an offer to move to Italy, but that's a long way from Ukraine and they'd

rather be home.

There are many people in town who are still trying to help. Several townsfolk show up every day at the Radymno train station, offering hot bowls of soup to the dozens of Ukrainians waiting for departures to all parts of Poland. "We have big hearts around here," said Krystyna Poradowska, who organized the effort called Active Women. "We are crying when we think of them."

Mr. Sanocki said he'll try to keep the shelter open. He spent Monday bustling around the building with friends making sure everything worked and that rides had been organized. He's also turned space in his repair shop into a storage area for several charities who plan to ship medicine and food to Ukraine. On Monday the floor was piled with boxes and packages, including several from Finland containing dog food.

As he took a break and stood in the small kitchen, Ms. Aksamtovska quietly offered her appreciation. "Thank you, thank you," she said. "I don't know these people. But they have been excellent."

Beijing says China-Russia relations 'rock solid' amid global turmoil

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The relationship between Beijing and Moscow remains strong "no matter how precarious and challenging the international situation," Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said Monday.

China has faced intense international pressure to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with many in the West seeing Beijing's silence on this issue as tacit support for Moscow.

Chinese President Xi Jinping met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Beijing last month, and the two released a joint statement blasting NATO expansion and criticizing the West. In the wake of the war, Chinese officials have refused to describe it as an invasion while recognizing Moscow's "legitimate security concerns." Beijing also abstained from two motions criticizing Russia at the United Nations.

While it has been reported that Mr. Putin briefed Mr. Xi of

his intention to invade Ukraine, some commentators have suggested China may have been misled about the extent of the military operation and now regrets signalling support for Russia ahead of an invasion that has made it a global pariah.

There was no sign of that Monday, with Mr. Wang saying the joint statement sent "an unequivocal message to the world that China and Russia jointly opposed attempts to revive the Cold War mindset or provoke ideology-based confrontation."

Speaking at a tightly controlled news conference on the sidelines of the National People's Congress in Beijing, he said China's relations with Russia were "rock solid," describing ties between the two countries as "one of the most crucial bilateral relationships in the world."

"There is a bright prospect for co-operation between the two sides," Mr. Wang said. "Relations between China and Russia will not be influenced by any third party."

Asked about Ukraine, he reiterated Beijing's support for peace

talks but quoted a Chinese proverb in saying, "It takes more than one cold day to freeze three feet of ice."

Numerous observers have suggested China could play a role in bringing about an end to the conflict, given its strong ties to both Russia and Ukraine. Speaking to Spanish newspaper El Mundo last week, European Union foreign-policy chief Josep Borrell said Beijing is the only logical choice for the role of peacemaker.

"There is no alternative. We cannot be the mediators, that is clear," he said. "And it cannot be the U.S. either. Who else? It has to be China."

On Monday, Mr. Wang said Beijing "stands ready to play a constructive role and mediate with the international community when necessary."

He pointed to a call between Mr. Xi and Mr. Putin on Feb. 25 in which the Chinese leader said he supported Moscow's efforts to "resolve the Ukraine crisis via dialogue."

"Russia and Ukraine have since had two rounds of talks,"

Mr. Wang said. "We hope an upcoming third round makes further progress."

In a call with Mr. Wang last week, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kubela said he "looked forward to China's mediation efforts for the ceasefire," though it remains unclear how much Kyiv will view Beijing as a neutral party given its continued support for Moscow.

Monday's news conference, which ran for more than 100 minutes, was dominated by Ukraine, but Mr. Wang had far more criticism for Washington's role in the crisis than Moscow's.

Beyond Eastern Europe, he accused the U.S. of "provoking China on issues concerning our core interests" and trying "to piece together small blocks to suppress China," an apparent reference to new alliances pushed by Washington in Asia.

"These actions undermine the overall China-U.S. relations and disrupt and erode international peace and stability," Mr. Wang said. "This is not how a responsible power should act."

Beijing reacted angrily last

week after a delegation of former senior U.S. defence and security officials visited the self-ruled island of Taiwan, which China regards as part of its territory.

An annual budget released Saturday included a 7.1-per-cent increase in China's military spending, as analysts warned the balance of power on either side of the Taiwan Strait is increasingly tilting in Beijing's favour. In the past year, Chinese military aircraft have flown repeated sorties near Taiwanese airspace, and the People's Liberation Army has staged military exercises focused on invading the island.

Some observers have seen parallels between Russia's invasion of Ukraine and China's frequent threats to seize Taiwan by force should the democracy declare full independence from the mainland. Mr. Wang rejected that comparison Monday, saying "the Taiwan question and the Ukraine issue are different in nature and are not comparable at all."

"Taiwan is an inalienable part of Chinese territory, and the Taiwan question is part of China's internal affairs," he said.

Romania: Funds secured for major upgrades to base, but construction is 'years' away

FROM A1

Across Europe, countries have rushed to boost defence budgets and fortify NATO's eastern flank, in fear that military success for Moscow will bring its forces to the borders of Romania and other countries. Germany pledged to double military spending. Romania's President has called for a 25-per-cent increase in its armed forces output. "There is a need for a fundamental rethinking of the way, and of the philosophy in which the allied structure on the eastern flank is conceived," Romanian Foreign Minister Bogdan Aurescu said Monday.

The border with Ukraine is situated less than 100 kilometres from here. Mihail Kogalniceanu is the closest NATO airfield to Crimea, where Russia has staged a major military expansion since annexation of the peninsula in 2014.

The air base today shares a runway with a civilian airport. The Romanian government, NATO and the U.S. have already allocated nearly US\$3-billion for a major upgrade, with plans for a

second runway and improved military facilities. The money is already secured.

But building that could take "five, six years," Eduard Dodu, the deputy base commander, said Monday.

Creating new defences on the eastern reaches of NATO has become an imperative from the outset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, when Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said the alliance was activating its defence plans, allowing it to place "troops where needed."

Many of those have come to Mihail Kogalniceanu, which is now home to more than 2,000 soldiers, including French, Italian, Germans and Dutch — in addition to a large U.S. presence. Italian and German Typhoon jets are stationed here, along with French army vehicles and a considerable repository of U.S. equipment: Blackhawk helicopters, tanks, armoured personnel carriers, fuel trucks and Humvees. The U.S. has installed fuel storage tanks and even a new terminal building for arriving troops.

General Mark Milley, chairman

of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, visited the base on Monday, underscoring its importance. He has been travelling through Europe, meeting with military leaders in Belgium, Poland, Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania.

On Monday, groups of Dutch soldiers walked in flip-flops on a rocky avenue built between soft-sided dormitories. Some stood on wooden pallets to keep off the mud.

Since 2017, Canadian CF-18 fighter jets have been stationed at Mihail Kogalniceanu five times for NATO aerial policing missions. A half-dozen jets, and roughly 200 personnel, are due to return in July. Such deployments typically last four months.

"We are willing to do our share to make sure that the entire eastern flank, and in particular Romania, is protected," Canadian Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly said Monday, when she visited the air base.

The Canadian military uses two large flexible structures when it operates here, akin to hangar-sized McPherson tents. Their pliable roofs have raised

concern in the Romanian military that they could collapse in a heavy snowfall.

The U.S. has had problems, too. An apron with parking for several aircraft that was supposed to be complete last year remains unfinished. "They poured the concrete, then they destroyed it," Commander Dodu said. "They poured the concrete, I think, three times."

Underinvestment by Romania in its military was a conscious decision. After the overthrow of Mr. Ceausescu in 1989, Romania began to divert national funds to other purposes. Its military contracted from more than 300,000 people to less than 60,000 today. Romania joined NATO in 2004 and the European Union in 2007.

Over the past three decades, "it was so peaceful for so many years that it made no sense for the Romanian government to invest money in a military base," said Iulian Fota, deputy minister for strategic affairs in the Romanian foreign ministry.

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 began to change that calculus, and Romania started to

open Mihail Kogalniceanu to foreign forces. The U.S. built fencing, a road and a series of buildings. NATO forces, including Canadians, began joint exercises.

"We know what we have for the moment in place. At the same time, you have seen we are investing a lot of money to improve the situation," Mr. Fota said.

But he dismissed concerns about how much time it will take to see Mihail Kogalniceanu turned into a more effective military air base. "They will try to do the work as fast as possible," he said.

Instead, he pointed to the foreign troops that have poured in over the past week.

"If you look at the Cold War, you will see that the Americans did not have many troops in western Berlin," he said. "Numbers are not important. The message is important." The military collection already taking shape at the air base is soon to be augmented by other countries, he said.

"The fact you see so many allied troops coming here in a matter of weeks is a very strong signal," he said. "This is the best proof that solidarity works."