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UKRAINE: ON EVE OF FESTIVE WINTER PERIOD RUSSIA RELENTLESSLY CONTINUES AERIAL STRIKES, AT TRAGIC HUMAN COST

The scale and intensity of aerial strikes conducted by Russian forces across Ukraine – the latest occurring in the night of 22-23 December, killing at least three and leaving several regions without power in freezing temperatures – have significantly increased compared to a year ago. Reports of severe damage to residential buildings and other civilian objects, and civilian casualties and injuries, have become a daily soundbite for anyone who follows news from Ukraine. The virtually routine nature of these reports has for external observers blunted the human tragedy behind each incident. As the human cost of Russia's aggression against Ukraine mounts daily, the lived-through experience behind each and every strike that impacts Ukrainian civilians must be remembered and documented, and calls for truth, justice and reparations for all victims of the aggression must resonate ever louder.

Amnesty International has spoken to several civilians directly affected by two recent Russian strikes on civilians and civilian objects, specifically those who survived them or witnessed their aftermath, as well as members of rescue services, local administrations and police. Before proceeding, the reader is advised that the testimonies presented below may be disturbingly painful.

KINDERGARTEN IN KHARKIV, 22 OCTOBER 2025

On 22 October 2025, at around 10:00, two Shahed-type drones struck a kindergarten in Kharkiv. Kharkiv is a regional capital and one of Ukraine's largest cities, home to over one million people. Located in north-east of Ukraine, some 400 km east of the capital Kyiv, it is only about 30 km from the Russian border, leaving it particularly vulnerable to cross-border attacks.

Yevhen Vasylenko, State Emergency Service of Ukraine (SESU) Media Officer in Kharkiv Region who was one of the first on the scene on that day as part of the rescue team, told Amnesty International that the Kharkiv kindergarten had been hit by two Shahed-type drones.

"Shahed" is a common Ukrainian reference to the type of loitering munition initially designed in Iran, which has been acquired, modified and mass-produced by Russia, and used daily by its forces in dozens, sometimes hundreds (over 700 on 9 July alone), for deep strikes across Ukraine. This munition has a range of several hundred miles and carries a 40-50 kg warhead, or double that in the latest models, and is navigated via a satellite-based system.1 It is a weapon capable of accurate strikes deep inside Ukraine. Its flight, and its debris, and the severe damage caused, are familiar sights for many Ukrainians today, and particularly the members of emergency and rescue teams. The description of the aftermath of the strike in Kharkiv on 22 October 2025, and the photographic evidence is consistent with a strike by Shahed-type munition. A partial selection of photographic evidence reviewed by an Amnesty International Evidence Lab weapons expert shows the remnants of at least one Shahed 136-pattern engine and other distinctive elements of its frame. These precision-guided loitering munitions are designed to explode on impact and are known in Russia as Geran-2.

"We headed to the location straight after we received the information about the incident. The air raid alert was still active, and we were expecting more drones (and potential hits) but there were children in the kindergarten and they needed rescuing," stated Yevhen Vasylenko.

[1] Kateryna Hodunova, "How Russia modified Iran's Shahed-136 drones — and what it means for Ukraine", *The Kyiv Independent*, 17 July 2025, available at https://kyivindependent.com/how-russia-modified-irans-shahed-136-drones-and-what-it-means-for-ukraine/.

According to Yevhen, the building of the kindergarten was on fire and the roof and the first floor were badly damaged and partially collapsed, damaging the ground floor. “Children were very scared, some were crying and calling for their mothers”.

A member of the kindergarten staff who wished to remain anonymous, told Amnesty International that they had always taken children to the shelter in the building’s basement during every air raid alert, and that morning was no exception. “After we heard the air raid alert, we all went down to the shelter. Children were not [physically] hurt, and they all can request mental help services. But there will be nothing where their kindergarten once was, the building is destroyed, only the basement is left, and you cannot have a kindergarten with only the basement”.

Dmytro Soima, the representative of the local police who was helping the emergency services to evacuate the children and who was documenting the attack, told Amnesty International that there had been around 50 children in the building, between the ages of two and four. “They all had acute stress reaction. Also, the cars parked outside the kindergarten caught fire too, there was black toxic smoke everywhere when the children were being evacuated”.

Maryna, the mother of two-year-old Tymofii who was in the kindergarten at the time of the attack stated that her son was still coping with his experience of the attack at the time of the interview, on 5 November. “He was very withdrawn about this. Only a few days after, we were drawing, and he was drawing that day. He drew the fire and asked me to draw a firefighter, and we started drawing the whole scene, how they were in the basement, children sitting in a circle and a teacher with a torch who was trying to embrace them. He told me children were crying, and that he was crying too, and he allowed me to draw a tear in his eyes. That was the first time when he told me he was scared.”

Amnesty International’s Evidence Lab has verified a series of videos and photos taken within hours of the attack, posted on local media and social networks. They show the outer walls of the kindergarten partially collapsed, charred roof beams and burned-out vehicles in the courtyard. The interior footage shows children’s toys, small chairs and colourful murals amid debris — clear evidence of the building’s civilian function. Analysis of high-resolution imagery and fragments confirmed the presence of distinctive engine components and structural elements of Shahed 136-pattern drones. Amnesty International has found no evidence, nor indication, that a military target was present within the vicinity of the building at the time of the strike.

RESIDENTIAL BUILDING IN TERNOPIL, 19 NOVEMBER 2025

The Russian attack in Ternopil started at 06:30 on 19 November 2025. Ternopil is located about 400 km west of Kyiv, a capital in a region which is one of Ukraine’s furthest from the active frontline. Its pre-war population was over 200,000.

Amnesty International has not been able to independently verify the type of weapons used to target the apartment building, but according to local police, the attack on the city on that day included seven cruise/ballistic missiles and three Shahed-type drones, and resulted in three impacts on three different locations around the city. Serhii Kreta, the Media Officer of Ternopil Regional Police, told Amnesty International that an apartment block on 15 Kvitnia Street was hit first. The strike caused a fire. The building had 117 apartments, and around 488 people were registered as living at this address at the time.2

Tetiana, a pregnant resident of the apartment block on 15 Kvitnia Street, told Amnesty International that on that morning she heard an air raid alert and shortly after, the sound of an explosion — a missile had hit and destroyed the shed in the courtyard of their apartment block. Later, she learnt that the explosion had killed several people who were outside at the time trying to reach the shelter. Tetiana and her daughter were just getting ready to go to the shelter in the basement when the apartment block was hit. “I was thrown at the fridge by the first hit wave and then fell on the floor. When I got up, the second wave hit me, and I felt glass hitting my back. I saw that my daughter’s room was on fire. I shouted to my husband that our little one was on fire. I do not know how he

[2] The UN HRMMU reported that the strike on 19 November 2025 in Ternopil was a Russian combined attack which killed at least 38 civilians, including 18 women, 12 men, 4 girls and 4 boys, and injured 99, including 17 children. See UN OHCHR, “Increasing attacks on Ukraine’s energy infrastructure place civilians at risk, UN human rights monitors warn”, 12 December 2025, available at https://ukraine.ohchr.org/en/Increasing-attacks-on-Ukraine-s-energy-infrastructure-place-civilians-at-risk-UN-human-rights-monitors-warn.

managed to get into her room and save her. She did not recognize me at first as I was covered in blood. But she was not hurt".

Tetiana shared that she, her daughter, her husband and her mother-in-law attempted to leave the apartment, but the apartment's door was stuck after the strike, and her husband had to force it open. They could smell gas leaking and were afraid that the whole building could explode, but her husband returned to the flat to fetch their documents and did not come back despite them calling for him. After a while they went downstairs to the ground floor. There, a neighbor advised them to leave the building immediately as it had caught fire and the leaking gas could explode any moment. Yet, it was also dangerous to go into the open as they could hear the sounds of the cars parked outside burning and exploding. They felt trapped. Just before they were ready to step outside, a young man opened the porch door and was immediately killed by shrapnel coming from a car, in front of their eyes. "He was running out, but the blast throws him back into the entrance, and he's just dead immediately. He was instantly shredded by shrapnel, and when we ran to him, he was no longer breathing". When they finally went outside there was a huge fire, and they headed in the opposite direction. "We wanted to go towards the kindergarten, but the flames were so intense that we didn't. And we look right, and there are so many people lying there. They weren't screaming anymore, they weren't asking for anything — they were just lying there. Just lying there with their eyes open, that's all. We were walking literally over bodies because there was no other way to go. I kept shouting and calling my husband's name but he wasn't there."

Tetiana does not have full recollection of how they managed to reach the school where the other nearest shelter was, but she remembered that it was so full that people were standing outside. A woman saw her covered in blood and took her inside the school where she was provided with first aid. "My daughter was crying and asking whether I would die. She still has not recovered from that day. Tonight, when she heard an air raid alert she threw up. She was very social before but now is afraid of people."

At the school, Tetiana was waiting for an ambulance, and there her husband found them. "He was worried we were gone and we were worried that he was gone, but we finally met. He helped me to the ambulance and went to the hospital with me. But my daughter and mother-in-law stayed behind, and we could not reach them over the phone as there was no mobile connection, so he told me he would go back and look for them. He promised to call me but never did. People told me they saw him back at the apartment block, that he came back there, was helping to evacuate people". Tetiana's daughter and mother-in-law were safe, but her husband has been missing since then. They still do not know his fate.

Later that day one more apartment block was hit in Ternopil, on Stusa Street. According to Serhii Danilin, representative of SESU in Ternopil region, the building on Stusa Street was heavily damaged and caught fire, people were trapped on the upper floors and under the rubble. The emergency services included 352 rescue workers who worked non-stop for four days. "The main efforts were focused on clearing the rubble as quickly as possible to reach people who might still be alive underneath. I want to note that during the operation, one person was indeed rescued. A man was under the debris. Rescuers heard him during a moment of silence. The rubble was cleared almost entirely by hand because the fragments were very small, so gradually, layer by layer, meter by meter, everything was removed and checked. The most tragic part is that 33 people died, including six children. Ninety-four were injured, among them 18 children, and 46 people were rescued, including seven children. As of the end of the rescue operation, we had six people missing".

The regional police spokesperson Serhii Kreta, commenting on the incident on Stusa Street, said to Amnesty International: "The missile hit the building directly. Many bodies were mutilated, burned, torn apart, and so on. Six people are considered missing because they may have burned completely or been torn apart to such an extent that we could not find them. The remains that have been recovered will be sent to forensics as they are so damaged that identities cannot be established otherwise."

THE HUMAN COST: TRUTH, REPARATION AND JUSTICE IMPERATIVE FOR ALL VICTIMS

These testimonies speak of the devastating impact of aerial strikes on civilians: families torn apart, children traumatized, and communities left in ruins.

International humanitarian law prohibits indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks and requires parties to distinguish between civilians and combatants, and between civilian objects and military objectives, and to take precautions to avoid civilian harm. Strikes on civilian objects such as kindergartens and residential apartment blocks violate these principles. Such attacks may constitute war crimes under Article 8 of the Rome Statute, which criminalizes intentionally directing attacks against civilian objects.

Amnesty International calls for a prompt, thorough, and impartial investigation of all suspected crimes under international law, and for all those responsible to be held accountable. It demands an immediate end to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, and truth, reparation and justice for all its victims.