

Donors bemoan problems with aid deliveries

Aid groups not holding breath for efficient customs service

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A U.S.-based church which organizes deliveries medicine, clothing and other humanitarian supplies to Ukraine says their shipments are being stymied by corrupt customs service workers, inadequate legislation and a culture of official disrespect for citizens.

The U.S. Church of Christ, which has been involved in relief assistance in Ukraine and other countries of Eastern Europe and Central America since 1997, is currently arranging a large shipment of humanitarian aid destined for Ukrainian hospitals, orphanages and others in need. The shipment is scheduled to arrive in October, but John Kachelman, the church's delivery coordinator, worries the project may not go smoothly.

Kachelman claims to have encountered problems with Ukrainian customs regarding similar, previous charity shipments.

"During the latest shipment it took us three weeks of fighting at Boryspil [airport] to get [the shipments] released and sent to Donetsk," he said.

He and his assistant, Tatyana Zozulina, say customs officials have not made clear to them why the shipment was delayed. "They simply told me to read the customs law, and that was it," Zozulina said.

Yury Shapovalenko, deputy head of the Humanitarian Aid Commission at the Cabinet of Ministers, indicated that for a Ukrainian organization to be eligible to receive humanitarian aid, it must be registered with the state. Humanitarian or charity organizations must apply in writing to the regional commission on humanitarian aid, which then forwards it to Kyiv for approval.

According to Ukrainian law on humanitarian aid, the regional commissions are also responsible for defining the contents of shipments received as humanitarian aid and then sending their approval to customs. Until such approval, Shapovalenko said, customs officers cannot process the necessary documentation, which, he agrees, may sometimes lead to frustrating delays



John Kachelman, the delivery coordinator for the U.S.-based Church of Christ, believes inadequate legislation and rampant corruption in Ukraine's customs service are preventing humanitarian aid shipments from reaching their final destination. (Courtesy photo)

and misunderstandings.

"Foreign charity organizations that have been working with Ukraine for a long time know all the nuances of our legislation," Shapovalenko said, "and they normally do not encounter any problems while sending aid to Ukraine."

The aid shipment planned by the Church of Christ is currently being put together from various points throughout the Midwest and southeastern U.S. and will include medical equipment and related supplies, essential hygienic products, clothing and toys for children. The aid from the first bulk containers is earmarked for orphanages and hospitals in Kyiv, Donetsk, Kharkiv and a number of other cities in eastern Ukraine.

In 2003, Shapovalenko said Ukraine received 35,558 tons of humanitarian aid, valued at \$64.8 million, from 46 countries. The donors have been Germany and the United States, he said.

Kachelman is not the first person to have met with frustration while trying to ship humanitarian aid to Ukraine.

Various foreign charity organizations have also experienced similar problems, mostly due to confusing Ukrainian legislation.

Even though Shapovalenko points out that anyone wishing to deal with charity shipments has to comply with Ukraine's existing laws, he agrees that the laws could be improved.

"Most complaints that come to us are concerned with the shipment of medicines," he said. "The problem is that medicines not registered in Ukraine are not allowed into the country. Changes to the law regarding this issue, as well as a couple of others, are currently awaiting passage through the Verkhovna Rada."

But legislation is not the only hurdle. Local authorities were also cited by Kachelman, who has unsuccessfully tried to meet with officials in Mezheva, a regional capital in Dnipropetrovsk oblast, which is set to receive an upcoming shipment from the CC.

"How can we help this community when the administrators will not even meet with us?" Kachelman asked.

The Post's attempts to reach authorities in Mezheva were also unsuccessful.

Tatyana Terekh, deputy head of social services in Mezheva, told the Post on April 30 that they have received only two shipments of humanitarian aid over the last six years, and most of it has consisted of second-hand clothing.

"The last time we got clothing it was in really bad condition and could not have been very helpful to anyone," Terekh said.

Terekh also said the Mezheva social service center is always open to cooperation with foreign humanitarian organizations.

Rick Walker, a minister of the Kyiv branch of CC, said he is now working on overcoming local obstacles in order to find the most effective ways to distribute incoming aid to those who really need it. "Some of it will go to our dental clinic, some to orphanages in Kyiv. The most difficult part," he said, "will be to get the aid to street kids, and we are now working this out."