Sirens ring day and night in Ukraine

Gaëlle Smith, Humanity and Inclusion’s emergency rehabilitation specialist, went to Ukraine in June to support the local teams in the country. She tells us about her experience.

In my work, I know how to prepare myself before going into a conflict zone. I have experienced it before and I know that I can count on continual support from Humanity and Inclusion and my colleagues, my family and friends.

However, the reality when I actually got to Ukraine earlier this year, and fully understood what people have endured and continue to go through day and night, well… there is no true preparation for that.

The weapons being used in Ukraine are far more advanced, mutilating and destructive than anything I have witnessed before and they are causing devastating injuries.

First, pressure from the blast can impact your lungs, ears, eyes and intestines. The explosion itself or shrapnel can lead to broken bones and flesh wounds, which could require amputation. Then, you may get traumatic brain and spine injuries from the collision. And, finally, there are the burns to the skin and even respiratory damage as you breathe in smoke, dust and chemicals.

In Dnipro, the patients presented with a mix of all these injuries. Some of these injuries on their own can be serious, and then when you put them together, it’s staggering.

As I travelled into Eastern Ukraine, I was struck to see villages and towns that were truly in survival mode. I could not help but think of my own home in Scotland, how safe our everyday life is and the fact that we don’t always value it.

The hospital I was supporting has 11 operating theatres, which were operating round the clock owing to the continual stream of ambulances and patients with blast injuries.

The high level of skills, knowledge and commitment of all the staff around me was evident in every aspect of patient care. The ever-growing number of patients, however, was pushing the staff to work longer hours and not take much-needed time off. There was no let-up in the pace of work, the complexity of the work, the amount of work.

They are doing an amazing job but this is an extremely difficult situation for anyone to work in. Each member of the team is constantly thinking about their own safety and their colleagues’ safety, as well as the safety of their patients. And the heart-breaking reality is that there are more civilians needing care than they have resources for.

Since February, intense heavy bombing has been devastating towns and cities throughout Ukraine, resulting in at least 12,000 civilian casualties.

The actual figures are likely to be much higher and, as the violence continues, the numbers of innocent people killed and injured continue to rise.

It is estimated that over 24million people are now in need of urgent humanitarian assistance.