

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	558
Land:	Ukraine
Kilde:	Human Rights Watch
Titel:	Ukraine: Escalating Russian Attacks on civilians
Udgivet:	22. maj 2025
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	21. juli 2025



Document #2125637

HRW – Human Rights Watch
(Author)

Ukraine: Escalating Russian Attacks on Civilians

May 22, 2025 12:00AM EDT | Report

Negotiating Governments Should Insist on Respect for Humanitarian Law

- Russian attacks in Ukraine since January 2025 have killed and injured more civilians than in the same period in 2024.
- The attacks violated the international law prohibition on indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks. Such attacks, when committed deliberately or recklessly, constitute war crimes under international law.
- Diplomatic efforts should prioritize protection of civilians and justice for violations. This means continued support for investigations and prosecutions of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

(Kyiv, May 22, 2025) – [Russian](#) attacks in [Ukraine](#) since January 2025 have killed and injured more civilians than in the same period in 2024, Human Rights Watch said today. Governments, particularly the Trump administration, should use their leverage in discussions with the Kremlin to press Russia to abide by international humanitarian law and end deliberate, indiscriminate, and disproportionate attacks on civilians and civilian objects.

“Russian attacks are killing and injuring more civilians, including women and children, than before, even as world leaders involved in negotiations express horror at the rising casualties,” said [Belkis Wille](#), associate crisis, conflict and arms director at Human Rights Watch. “Negotiators should

demand an immediate end to the targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure.”

Human Rights Watch examined four Russian attacks in Ukraine between February 1 and April 4, 2025, which killed at least 47 civilians and injured more than 180 others. Human Rights Watch found the attacks to be unlawful in that, at a minimum, they violated the international law prohibition on indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks. Russian forces failed to distinguish between civilian and military objectives or to avoid the disproportionate civilian casualties that could be expected from the attacks compared to any anticipated military advantage. Such attacks, when committed deliberately or recklessly, constitute war crimes under international law.

In the February 1 attack, a large high-explosive missile detonated at 7:44 a.m. in midair and destroyed the corner of an apartment building in the city of Poltava, 240 kilometers from the front line, killing 15 civilians and injuring 20. A military air base is the only military target Human Rights Watch identified in the area, with its entrance about 700 meters from where the munition detonated.

On February 4, Russian forces launched a missile on the eastern town of Izium, 42 kilometers from the front line. The attack [hit](#) the city council building in the central district, killing 6 civilians and injuring 57, including 3 children. The closest military target Human Rights Watch identified was a military recruitment office about a kilometer away.

On the night of March 5, an explosive weapon struck the roof of the Tsentralnyi Hotel in the southeastern city of Kryvyi Rih, 70 kilometers from the front line, killing 6 civilians and injuring 31. The munition [hit](#) the hotel’s center and damaged 14 residential buildings and several others. Russian [forces](#) and military [bloggers confirmed](#) the attack, saying it had killed 28 foreign fighters in the hotel, which Human Rights Watch found no evidence to support. The closest military target Human Rights Watch identified was a military recruitment office 5.7 kilometers away.

Karol Swiacki, founder and CEO of Ukraine Relief, a nongovernmental organization providing humanitarian support to Ukrainians, was in the hotel restaurant at the time of the attack with six people, including a woman and her 6-year-old son.

“We were talking, we were laughing a bit, and then in a millisecond, a huge noise, the sound of glass breaking, lots of dust,” he said. “The place where we were sitting became hell... We were in shock, trying to find a way out... It was a nightmare. The child was screaming.... The dust made it impossible to see anything. I had to cover my head and mouth with my coat.”

On the evening of April 4, Russian forces launched another attack on Kryvyi Rih. A munition burst in midair above a park, damaging its small playground, many buildings in its vicinity, and a restaurant. The attack **killed** 20 civilians, including 9 children, most of them in the playground. Seventy-three other people were **injured**, including a 3-month-old baby.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) **said** it was the deadliest single attack on children since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion. The closest military target Human Rights Watch identified was the same military recruitment office, about 2.5 kilometers from the park.

Russian forces did not issue warnings to civilians in the vicinity before any of these deadly attacks.

Between January and **April**, civilian casualties increased by 57 percent, particularly the number of people injured, compared with the same period in 2024. On April 24, Russia carried out a devastating missile and drone **attack** on Kyiv, killing at least 12 civilians and injuring at least 90.

International humanitarian law, or the laws of war, obligate parties to a conflict to distinguish at all times between combatants and civilians. Civilians may never be the deliberate target of attacks. Warring parties are required to take all feasible precautions to minimize harm to civilians and civilian objects. Attacks may target only military objectives. Attacks targeting civilians, or that fail to discriminate between combatants and civilians, or are expected to cause disproportionate harm to the civilian population compared to the anticipated military gain, are prohibited.

Serious violations of the laws of war, including indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks, committed with criminal intent—that is, deliberately or recklessly—are war crimes. Individuals may be held criminally liable for committing a war crime, as well as assisting in, facilitating, aiding, or abetting a war crime. Commanders and civilian leaders may be prosecuted for war crimes as a matter of command responsibility when they knew or should have known about the commission of war crimes and took insufficient measures to prevent them or punish those responsible.

“Diplomatic efforts to end Russia’s war in Ukraine should prioritize protection of civilians and justice for abuse,” Wille said. “This means no amnesties for those who committed serious violations of international humanitarian law, and continued support for investigations and prosecutions of war crimes and crimes against humanity.”

For details on the four attacks, please see below

Methodology

Researchers interviewed twenty witnesses to the attacks, including three who were injured or lost loved ones, three local officials in the areas attacked, as well as a rescue worker and a volunteer who responded to the attacks. Human Rights Watch also reviewed statements by Russian forces, military bloggers, and media reports in the aftermath of the attacks and analyzed satellite imagery and photographs and videos taken by witnesses and shared with Human Rights Watch or posted to social media accounts, none of which showed any signs of military personnel, equipment, or weapons at the attack sites.

Poltava Apartment Building Attack

The explosion near an apartment building in Poltava caused extensive damage, destroying part of the building's west wing entrance and collapsing sections of the fourth and fifth floors. Blast effects shattered 1,500 windows, some in buildings as much as 270 meters away, [affecting](#) 308 households and 528 residents, according to a charity that helped replace the windows.

Human Rights Watch visited the site on March 23, observing the destruction and speaking with seven residents, including three whose apartments were destroyed, and the head of Kindergarten No. 81, located 50 meters from the blast. She described damage that forced the preschool to relocate all 80 to 100 children.

Some residents had monitored air raid alerts overnight. One woman said her husband checked missile activity in the area on Telegram channels at 3 a.m. The couple then moved their family to a nearby shelter. "When we got [to the shelter], we heard around five explosions nearby, and then we read in the Telegram groups that an X-22 missile was [headed for] Poltava, so we moved deeper into the shelter," she said. The attack destroyed the family's apartment.

Liudmila Novitska, 71, said she was in her kitchen making breakfast when "something suddenly exploded. There was a deafening sound, then there was smoke. Thankfully I had my phone with me, so I called my son and grandson. There was fire in the hallway of my apartment, and the rescuers came and saved me." She said her bedroom was destroyed and that she would not have survived had she still been in bed.

The attack killed 13 residents in apartments in the building's first entryway and two others from nearby buildings. Witnesses described a vacuum-like sensation (often associated with detonations from explosive weapons) before the explosion, followed by a loud thud and fire. Emergency services responded swiftly, rescuing survivors and recovering bodies.

Human Rights Watch verified photographs and videos posted on social media platforms and sent directly to researchers that show the aftermath: fire, debris, and personal belongings scattered among ruins. On February 1, Russia's Defense Ministry [reported](#) a series of attacks with long-range guided weapons ostensibly against Ukraine's gas and energy infrastructure, saying that "the objectives of the strike have been achieved, all designated facilities have been hit." Human Rights Watch could not identify any gas or energy infrastructure hit in the attack.

The entrance to the closest military facility, a Ukrainian military air base, is approximately 700 meters from the strike site. Russia previously carried out an [attack](#) on the base on July 2, 2024.

Izium City Council Building Attack

On February 4, 2025, at 11:36 a.m., Russian forces fired a [missile](#) on Izium, in the Kharkivska region, hitting the former City Council building, which had already been [damaged](#) in 2022. The explosion hit the boiler room, killing the worker on duty. It killed five civilians immediately, and one died later in the hospital. Fifty-seven others, including three children, were injured, ranging from cuts and concussions to post-traumatic stress disorder. The blast also damaged 11 residential buildings, and the former Kremianets hotel, then an administrative center where dozens were working. Human Rights Watch verified seven photographs posted on April 4 on the Telegram account of the head of the Kharkivska Regional State Administration showing the damage to the City Council building. In the photographs, the northeastern corner of the multi-story building is collapsed, its facade shredded, windows blown out, and ground floor severely damaged. Five body bags are seen on the ground nearby.

Human Rights Watch spoke with Izium's deputy mayor, Volodymyr Matsokin, and two government workers. Tetiana Martynova, 54, said she was in her fourth-floor office in the administrative center when the explosion shattered glass, injuring her.

Yulia Budianska, 32, was in her office on the second floor and was caught in the explosion. Budianska was bruised and bleeding from shattered glass and a window frame that had fallen on her but was able to walk. Outside she saw a 14-year-old girl lying on the ground clutching her side. Budianska was hospitalized for five days. She said five of her colleagues were injured, mostly by shattered windows, falling frames, and blast pressure.

In one verified video posted to Telegram on February 4, a large number of the former Kremianets hotel's windows are seen to be shattered. The same video also shows three buildings nearby with similar damage.

A Russian military-affiliated Telegram channel claimed the strike targeted Ukrainian soldiers and foreign nationals allegedly involved in military operations with landmines masquerading as humanitarian deminers. The posts implied the building was functioning as a hotel where foreign nationals and soldiers were staying. However, local officials said that Kremianets had ceased to function as a hotel in autumn 2022. Those interviewed said there were no military targets in the area at the time of the attack. The closest military target Human Rights Watch identified was a military recruitment office about one kilometer from the building.

Kryvyi Rih Hotel Attack

On March 5, 2025, at 10 p.m., a munition struck the roof of the five-story Tsentralnyi Hotel in Kryvyi Rih, [killing](#) six civilians and [injuring](#) 31 others. It also killed a soldier on leave. The explosion destroyed the hotel's main entrance, stairs, beams, and load-bearing internal walls. According to local [authorities](#) and media [reports](#), it also damaged 14 residential buildings, a post office, a cultural center, twelve shops, two schools, and two kindergartens.

Human Rights Watch interviewed Karol Swiacki, of Ukraine Relief, and Igor Logvinov, chairman of the charitable organization Freedom Trust, who were both in the hotel restaurant at the time as part of a group of seven, as well as a teenager who was volunteering with emergency services and arrived to the site of the explosion hours later. Logvinov said that after the explosion released a thick veil of dust, people tried to find a way out:

The women with us—locals—managed to figure out where the exit was ... and guided us. [Our path] was blocked with debris ... We found a window and started helping people get out through it...People started screaming. We turned around and saw a person lying on the pedestrian crossing... We saw people starting to come out of the hotel, running one after another, covered in blood.

Outside, Swiacki and Logvinov saw a fire on the roof and shattered windows. The hotel's top three floors were destroyed, and debris had buried vehicles in the parking lot, including two Ukraine Relief vans filled with aid that the team was planning to deliver to children with cerebral palsy and autism.

Human Rights Watch verified videos and photographs showing the explosion and a fireball, damage to the hotel's roof and main entrance, at least seven vehicles buried beneath rubble, and [rescue efforts](#). Local [authorities](#) said an Iskander ballistic missile directly struck the hotel. Logvinov noted that metal fragments resembling "small cubes" caused the most injuries. Medical reports [indicated](#) victims suffered concussions, fractures, crush injuries, trauma, and internal organ damage.

Swiacki said he saw a man bleeding in the rubble and heard a woman crying for her husband, who, as he learned later, was killed by metal fragments. Rescue workers retrieved bodies from the wreckage. **Swiacki** and Logvinov separately said they had not seen any armed forces in the hotel or military targets in the area that night.

The Russian forces and military [bloggers confirmed](#) the March 5 attack on the hotel and [claimed](#) it had killed 28 foreign fighters staying there. **Swiacki**, Logvinov, and the teenage volunteer said they had not seen any foreign fighters there. Human Rights Watch was unable to identify any military targets in the vicinity of the attack.

Russian forces had previously [targeted](#) the same area on October 20, 2024, damaging the hotel, nearby buildings, and 14 vehicles and injuring 4 civilians, including a 12-year-old. Russian media [claimed](#) then, too, that Ukrainian and foreign soldiers had been staying in the hotel.

Kryvyi Rih Playground Attack

On April 4, at 6:50 p.m., Russian forces launched a missile strike on a residential neighborhood in Kryvyi Rih. The munition detonated in midair above a residential block with a playground in the middle of the neighborhood. The attack killed 20 civilians, including 9 children, and injured 73 others, including a 3-month-old baby. Local authorities [reported](#) damage to the park, 34 apartment buildings, 6 educational institutions, shops, businesses, urban infrastructure, several cars, and 1 private house.

Three employees of a nearby restaurant, RoseMarine (also known as Magellan), were injured, the restaurant's windows and door were blown out, and its walls and roof were damaged. A doctor [described](#) injuries from debris and metal fragments, bone fractures, internal organ damage, and other traumatic injuries. Thirty-eight people were hospitalized, fifteen with severe injuries.

Human Rights Watch spoke to Viktor Stochuk and Iryna, both witnesses to the attack, and the restaurant's manager. Stochuk was in his first-floor apartment when he saw a bright flash and then heard "a deafening sound that swept across the room several times." He heard car alarms, and his room filled with smoke and shattered glass. "About five to ten seconds later, I heard screams," Stochuk said. "These were the most terrible screams I have heard in my life." He put on his shoes and ran outside, where he saw a taxi on fire. It exploded several times. He did not know if anyone was in it.

Stochuk saw massive destruction in the playground area. He started to panic, as his wife and two children had gone outside for a walk. He saw an older woman lying on the steps to his building and carried her to a bench:

I spoke to her, realizing she was alive, but badly injured. I was covered in her blood. I checked her head and neck—no injuries there. Then I saw a bone sticking out from her right arm. I had already felt something was wrong with the arm; it was hanging unnaturally.

Later, Strochuk heard from neighbors that the woman had injuries from metal fragments to her neck, lung, and collarbone. She suffered a stroke which caused her to go blind.

Strochuk ran toward an ambulance, but the team was loading it with injured children. Another ambulance arrived around 10 to 15 minutes later and helped her. Strochuk soon found his family unharmed. He saw another woman sitting in the street with a metal fragment injury to her leg and helped her husband bandage it. About 20 to 30 minutes after the explosion he went closer to the playground, where he saw medics carrying children into ambulances.

Iryna, 32, who asked that her surname not be used to protect her privacy, was at home with her husband and two children in their fifth-floor apartment in the same building, 58 meters from the blast site. A blast shattered the apartment's windows. The apartment building faces the playground. Iryna shared eight photographs of damage to her home, including the bathroom and blown-out windows in the kitchen, living room, and two bedrooms.

Once outside, Iryna realized the munition had exploded between her building and the corner of the next building, which was heavily damaged. The building, Spivdryzhnosti 96, is visible in the photographs and videos Human Rights Watch verified.

Human Rights Watch verified bodycam footage posted to Telegram by a first deputy chief of the Patrol Police Department on April 5 showing the immediate aftermath of the attack. At the beginning, a phone screen displays the time as 6:57 p.m. The footage, of blurred scenes edited together, shows rescue workers and other residents treating people, including in the park, playground, and nearby buildings. It shows at least three young children lying apparently dead in and around the playground.

In another video also verified by Human Rights Watch, residents and emergency workers are around the playground, carrying a young child, laying him on the ground and checking for breath. The child died, [media reports](#) said.

Strochuk shared with Human Rights Watch CCTV footage from his building's two cameras. The building overlooks a courtyard and a parking lot, 100 meters from the playground. The CCTV footage of the courtyard

shows two women in civilian clothing sitting on a bench followed by the explosion. The time stamp is 6:50 p.m. Following the attack, one of the women steps out of the camera's view and is later seen being carried by a civilian back to the bench, apparently injured.

Residents gather in the area and some assist the woman. At 7:12 p.m., people in beige body armor are seen arriving to help the woman. They are followed by emergency workers and others in personal protective equipment who take the woman away on a stretcher.

The CCTV footage of the parking lot captures the sound of an explosion followed by smoke rapidly filling the empty parking lot. The time stamp is 5:50 p.m. Minutes later, people are seen running through the parking lot, with one man carrying a woman who appears to have an injured leg.

The discrepancy in time stamps between the two videos is likely due to differences in the daylight saving time settings of the CCTV cameras.

Iryna and Strochuk both said the explosion left no crater but was a single midair detonation, which is consistent with the damage captured in photos and videos. They said it caused the most damage to the first and third floors of Spivdryzhnosti 96.

Strochuk, who works in construction, said he could see that the explosion affected structures as far as half a kilometer away, with metal fragments embedding as deep as 10 centimeters into concrete slabs. The ground near the explosion looked pockmarked, he said. Metal fragments damaged Iryna's family car, parked near the building close to the burning taxi. Human Rights Watch verified five photographs and one video showing a white car on fire as well as Spivdryzhnosti 96 with its windows blown out and its facade damaged and covered with numerous small holes.

After the attack, the Russian Defense Ministry [claimed](#) on Telegram that the target was a restaurant where it alleged Ukrainian and foreign military personnel were meeting, and that the attack killed up to 85 service people and [damaged] "up to 20 vehicles." Strochuk said he did not see any military personnel or vehicles in the area when he returned home from work an hour before the attack, passing the restaurant. Iryna said that day she saw a few civilian vehicles painted in military camouflage parked outside along with other cars.

The restaurant shared with Human Rights Watch seven pieces of CCTV footage, verified by Human Rights Watch, recording various parts of the restaurant at the moment of the attack and hours before. According to the time stamp on the footage, the missile struck at 6:51 p.m., aligning with the other CCTV cameras.

One camera feed from inside the restaurant entrance captured the explosion and the damage it caused inside, including broken doors and shattered windows. The footage reveals that civilians were in the restaurant in the hours leading up to the strike. Human Rights Watch did not find any evidence of military activity or targets in the restaurant's CCTV footage that day, before or at the time of the attack.

Olga, the restaurant's manager, confirmed there were no military personnel at the restaurant that day. She said the restaurant had a beauty industry event that ended at 6 p.m., with most participants leaving the premises by 6:30 p.m., as well as a separate birthday party for teenagers, which also ended before the attack. There are no other restaurants in the immediate vicinity.

Associated documents

Document ID 2125637 Translation / language version

22 May 2025 | [HRW – Human Rights Watch](#) (Author)

Ukraine

Article on Russian attacks on civilians in Ukraine since January 2025

[Ukraine : Escalade des attaques russes contre les civils](#) (Appeal or News Release, French)

fr

[ID 2125638](#)

ecoi.net description:

Article on Russian attacks on civilians in Ukraine since January 2025

Country:

Ukraine

Source:

[HRW – Human Rights Watch](#) (Author)

Published:

22 May 2025

Original link:

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/05/22/ukraine-escalating-russian-attacks-civilians>

Document type:

Appeal or News Release

Language:

English

Available on ecoi.net since:

2 June 2025

Document ID:

2125637

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Austrian Centre for	32, 1041 Wien	Imprint & Disclaimer
Country of Origin and	T +43 1 589 00 583	F.A.Q.
Asylum Research and	F +43 1 589 00 589	Data Protection Notice
Documentation	info@ecoi.net	
(ACCORD)		

ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

