

# KAKHOVKA DAM CIVILIAN PROTECTION NEEDS & RESPONSES



Kherson, Ukraine. June 8, 2023 © Костянтин і Влада Ліберови (Kostiantyn & Vlada Libergov, libkos)



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# I. Background

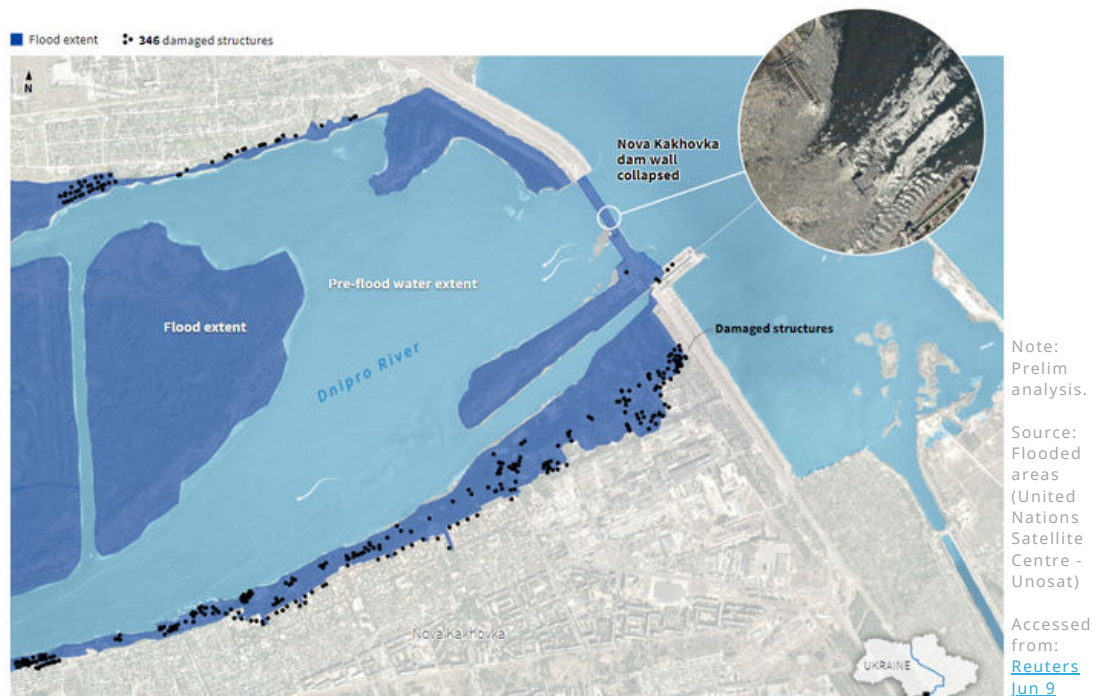
The protection and humanitarian crisis resulting from the attack on and collapse of the Nova Kakhovka Dam is of deep concern. There is an urgent need to protect civilians and for an immediate cessation of targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure. This brief provides an overview of key civilian protection needs and concerns related to the attack, highlighting both the short- and long-term consequences for civilians and the need for a comprehensive humanitarian response to these needs.

The Kakhovka Dam, which spans the Dniro River and was temporarily controlled by Russian forces, was attacked and collapsed early in the morning of June 6th, 2023 quickly causing widespread flooding. Flooding has affected approximately 20,000 people in 80+ settlements on the Russian-occupied left banks and approximately 16,000 people in 35 settlements in the Ukrainian-held territories on the right bank. 2,700 IDPs have been directly displaced by flooding and 1,600 have been evacuated through formal methods such as state-provided evacuation trains and emergency service evacuations or informal methods coordinated by volunteer groups. Those who have sought to evacuate civilians from the flood zone have reported being targeted by Russian forces, both with gunfire and artillery.

This flooding exacerbates an already tenuous situation for civilians in the Kherson region, who endured months of occupation, as well as major shelling and active violence in its aftermath. More broadly, the flooding also poses a risk to Ukraine and regional stability and health as it threatens the safety of nuclear facilities, specifically the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP). Attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure are a direct violation of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and the destruction of the dam has already been deemed a war crime by many international third-party monitors. The implications of flooding threaten the lives and health of both civilians and the environment and will have vast and long-term effects on both sides of the contact line. There is anticipated significant degradation of irrigation systems in consideration of the upcoming growing season, which supplies both the Ukraine and the global food system. Further effects will be felt by civilian populations in occupied Crimea, as the water held behind the dam was the main supply of potable drinking water for those communities. The destruction of Kakhovka Dam is the most recent of many attacks on civilians, first responders, and critical civilian infrastructure throughout this conflict.

## II. Methodology

Following the collapse of the Kakhovka Dam on June 6, 2023, Nonviolent Peaceforce Ukraine (NPUA) conducted a 1-week protection assessment with the purpose of identifying civilian protection concerns and analysing urgent humanitarian needs in the flood-affected area. Over the course of the first 6 days, the NPUA team engaged over 40 actors in Key Informant Interviews and over 60 conversations with affected residents (including civilians, 5 representatives from government authorities, and representatives of  $\geq 14$  local volunteer organisations and  $\geq 7$  international organisations), as well as conducting observations at 4 distribution sites, the Kherson train station that facilitates government evacuations, and 2 regional hospitals that are currently accommodating civilians in Kherson City. Although this assessment builds on the [protection assessment](#) conducted by NP in April 2022 and [follow-up analyses in specific Oblasts](#), it is rapid in nature, and cannot provide a comprehensive overview of civilian needs. The NPUA team can provide more detailed briefings on request and will supplement this initial assessment with updates.



NP's teams are currently engaging local authorities and volunteer networks to better understand the needs and response strategies to the flooding resulting from damage to the Nova Kakhovka Dam (NKD). NP teams across the southern Oblasts—Odesa, Mykolaiv, and Kherson—are conducting needs assessments and implementing protection response at key transit locations such as bus and train stations, collective centres, and points along the Kherson-Odesa displacement corridor.





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## III. Protection Needs & Responses

### Evacuations and Civilian Movement

NP staff and partners on the ground have reported difficulties in accessing and providing aid and evacuation to civilians due to ongoing shelling and other attacks. Partners highlight difficulties in reaching and evacuating civilians from Russian-occupied regions on the left bank of the Dnipro River where the impact of the dam's destruction is felt most deeply. Russian forces have refused to let civilians enter Ukrainian-held regions or allow Ukrainian relief workers into Russian-held areas and those who have been evacuated by Russian forces have reported little service provision. Flooding has also disturbed existing unexploded ordnance (UXO), further restricting civilian movement as mines have moved and will continue to be a major threat to civilian life as flooding recedes.

Volunteer networks are using the limited resources that they have to conduct evacuations from Russian-occupied areas but are being shot at by Russian forces. The following day, two elderly women and two volunteers were directly hit by artillery, 3 of whom died from injuries sustained during this attack. Many civilians in Russian-occupied areas are sleeping on their roofs as flooding is high and they have nowhere else to go.

Most civilians who have been evacuated want to stay close to their homes so they can access them once flooding subsides. Only 7 of 160 individuals who had been evacuated to Mykolaiv Hospital wanted to move to a secondary location. Those

most deeply affected include families, people with disabilities and the elderly, most of whom have been under occupation for over a year and had reduced access to services and humanitarian aid during this time. Four communities along the Inhulets River were completely flooded with civilians pulling back to Kherson city centre.

Many communities outside of Kherson are being overlooked in the emergency response. Several irrigation systems in lowlands are backfilled and the water will not reduce. For example, the city of Snihurivka in Mykolaiv Oblast was disconnected from roads which give them access to resources such as markets, hospitals and humanitarian aid.

**Case study:** Local organisations and volunteer collectives in Kherson have reached out for additional support to help facilitate civilian evacuations. Though often the only actors with access, restricted access to resources like fuel are often preventing them from carrying out urgent activities. As part of our response, NP has prioritised fuel support and volunteer stipends to local partners to bolster response capacity and support civilians on the move from locations affected by flooding. As of 1:00 PM on June 6th, the Kherson Rapid Response Unit (working as part of the Kherson Red Cross) had already facilitated over 1,000 evacuations and provided transportation to government-managed shelters in Mykolaiv City/Oblast. Both urgent evacuations and support for civilians in the aftermath rely heavily on local responders with access being resourced to do their work, and donors and other humanitarian organisations need to ensure support and space is provided directly to these groups.

### **Access to Emergency Humanitarian Resources and Services**

Flooding has already exacerbated existing and created new and urgent humanitarian needs including evacuation support, safe housing, medical care, and protection of civilian populations. The needs expressed by civilians are currently disconnected from what humanitarian actors are willing to provide. Local organizations and volunteer collectives have proved to be most adept at adapting to the specific needs of civilians while larger institutions have not been able to adjust to context-specific needs. For example, in a recent coordination meeting, a local administrator named the need for boats and life jackets. The room fell silent as these items are “outside the bounds” of the limited humanitarian scope that organizations have in Kherson. Similarly, INGOs have been very effective in rapidly

distributing hygiene kits and Non-Food Items (NFIs) but these kits often include basic supplies for which there is no great need rather than desperately needed items such as antiseptic and supplies to address the accidental aspiration of contaminated water. One partner on the ground shared **“Everyone in Kherson is able to have two toothbrushes and toilet paper, but everyone already had a toothbrush, but we don’t have water purification tablets.”**

Most rescue missions have been carried out by organizations and volunteer collectives who have crowd-sourced boats and carried out evacuations at great risk to themselves and without support from international humanitarian organizations. Partners are in need of life jackets to wear as they conduct evacuations. Life jackets must be high quality as volunteers who will be using them will also be wearing approximately 20 kilograms of PPE. British, Norwegian and US medical volunteer units have also deployed rapidly, establishing a bacterial contamination centre with a Ukrainian doctor who can prescribe drugs to treat waterborne illnesses.

There are concerns for populations at increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence and sexual exploitation, particularly single female-headed households, when situations necessitate living in group housing. There are very limited safe accommodations with direct wraparound services for vulnerable communities in Kherson and Mykolaiv.

The failure of external actors to respond appropriately to this situation reveals gaps in the current humanitarian system and the need for actors to be better prepared by allocating flexible funds for unanticipated emergency situations such as the attack and subsequent collapse of the Dam.



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**Case Study:** Since 2022, NP Ukraine has been sharing flak jackets and helmets with local aid organizations and volunteers in an effort to enhance community protection. A member of the Ukrainian Red Cross Society recounted a recent example from the flood response showing how this initiative has proved crucial:

“Our guys came under hailstorm fire when evacuating a person with limited mobility from the Island. Your [lent from NP] bulletproof vest saved [name redacted]. We thank you!”

Local volunteers and organizations often lack access to adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) due to financial constraints. NP's PPE lending program has been the sole international support in Ukraine, with plans to distribute new PPE in the future. The program aims to prioritize the safety of frontline volunteers and advocates for adopting similar practices by other international actors, as well as comprehensive safety management training is also necessary to empower local authorities in conflict-affected areas.

## **Health & Environmental**

The release of dam-related chemicals is causing urgent health concerns and environmental impacts. Many people in Kherson are exhibiting symptoms of bacterial skin rashes in response to contact with contaminated water. To address this, a medical group has set up a mobile decontamination centre with prevention—and where necessary, treatment—services available. The international community should anticipate and prepare for additional health ramifications: for example, volunteer medics on the ground have also warned that they are seeing several symptoms that are similar to Cholera. Despite these efforts, a clear strategy for management of potential personal and environmental health impacts needs to be in place, and well-resourced to respond in the event of disease spread.

Flooding will also have significant implications on irrigation systems in the upcoming growing season and impact drinking water systems throughout the south of Ukraine. Approximately 67% of the water from the reservoir was utilized for drinking water systems in occupied Crimea and it is estimated that there is a need for 16,000 litres of potable water each day in flood-affected areas on the right bank alone.



Deliveries of potable water have been limited and the need is severe. International volunteer networks that have unrestricted funds are working to address this need directly through the creation of an ad-hoc filtration system that has previously been implemented in other areas of Ukraine. One system running through four 1,000-litre tanks can supply potable water to a ramada of ~200 people, and the current focus is on replicating this response along the Dnipro River.

The contamination resulting from the oil reserves of the hydroelectric power plant, estimated to be around 100,000 tonnes, will have ecological consequences, particularly affecting animals and wildlife. The reservoir served as a vital irrigation source for Kherson and Mykolaiv, known for their fertile lands. Its collapse will not only affect the local food markets in Ukraine but also have implications for the global wheat system, with anticipated significant influence in African and Middle Eastern regions.

In addition to widespread displacement and insecurity, the flooding poses an urgent risk to the safe management of nearby nuclear facilities, in particular the ZNPP. One of the four turbines was still operating when the flood happened. This last turbine was shut down due to the lack of water needed for cooling. There are expected power cuts throughout the south as a result.

### **Unexploded Ordnance**

The flooding has significantly disturbed the presence of unexploded ordnance (UXO), resulting in the movement of mines and posing a major ongoing threat to civilian life as the floodwaters recede. Reports from the right bank (Ukrainian held) indicate multiple anti-personnel mines have been found washed ashore. The flooded area is known to have a high concentration of UXOs, cluster munitions, and similar hazards. The movement of silt and the loss of markers indicating the contaminated zones have exacerbated the situation, making it difficult to determine the new locations of the UXOs. Despite prior identification efforts, the markings established by emergency services have been washed away, and uncertainty remains about the extent of the sensitivity of the UXOs. Consequently, a comprehensive restart of the process that has been ongoing since the area's de-occupation is necessary. This also means a redoubling of efforts to ensure civilians have the information they need to manage risk related to UXO, including assessing surroundings, identifying UXO, and knowing how to connect with mine management services. NP, UNMAS and others have begun working on trainings for volunteers and national NGOs related to these needs, but much more needs to be done.





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## Information Access

Access to information about routes to safety, and accessing urgent aid and services, is limited and many people lost their phones in flooding and there have been periodic power outages throughout the region. This has further strained already limited access to information within affected communities. One resident on the ground shared that **“we do not have phones to ask for information about our village, I don’t know if my house is still standing.”**

Most communication between volunteer groups is occurring in Telegram groups but there have been reports that Russian forces are monitoring communication and setting themselves up in Sniper positions to target people who are trying to be extracted. Local actors have also expressed frustration with communication between humanitarian organizations and civilians. Many organizations keep reports and information insulated rather than broadly disseminating information to affected communities. This prevents information about key resources such as safehouses with wraparound services from being accessible to civilians.

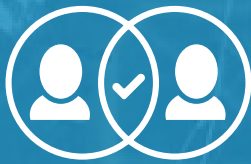
# Recommendations Summary



**PRIORITISE SAFE PASSAGE OF CIVILIANS AND HUMANITARIAN ACCESS NEGOTIATIONS**



**ADJUST HUMANITARIAN MODALITIES TO BETTER ACCOMMODATE RAPID FLEXIBLE FUNDING NEEDS TO SUPPORT CIVILIAN RESPONDERS IN EMERGENCY SITUATIONS**



**OPERATIONALISE RESPONSIBLE PARTNERSHIP PRINCIPLES**



**PLAN FOR AND ADDRESS THE LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES OF FLOODING**



**ELEVATE LOCAL EFFORTS TO ADDRESS UXOS**



**INCREASE ACCESS TO INFORMATION**

## III. Recommendations

**Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) calls on all actors to prioritise action for safe passage and unimpeded humanitarian access to civilians affected by the attack on and collapse of Nova Kakhovka Dam. There is an urgent need to protect civilians and for an immediate cessation of targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure, which are War Crimes under the [Rome Statute](#) of the International Criminal Court.**

### **a. Prioritise safe passage of civilians and humanitarian access negotiations**

There is an urgent need for the swift and safe passage of civilians and for humanitarian access to affected populations. NP calls on actors throughout the region to support this effort and refrain from any action that may prevent civilians from fleeing affected areas or endanger them as they flee. Additionally, NP calls on parties to the conflict to allow frontline and humanitarian actors access to provide lifesaving support to affected civilians. Those actors involved in high-level political negotiations on access must work urgently to secure agreement from parties to the conflict to facilitate safe movement and access to impacted communities. The current flooding has created additional risks for Ukrainian civilians who were already in a dire situation. The most pressing needs include health services, shelter, and protection of vulnerable populations. NP calls on the international community to rapidly deploy services to meet these needs.

### **b. Adjust humanitarian modalities to better accommodate rapid flexible funding needs to support civilian responders in emergency situations**

Civilian actors and local organizations have been at the forefront of the crisis response in Kherson. Unwieldy budgets and project constraints have caused the response by international humanitarian actors to be slow and largely ineffective. These actors must modify their operations to be prepared for emergent situations, accessible to civilian actors and flexible to address context-specific needs.



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### c. Operationalise [responsible partnership principles](#)

Due to security risks, international actors heavily rely on local response mechanisms like NNGOs, volunteer collectives, and community activists for frontline work. These local actors deliver aid and services in high-risk settings, especially to hard-to-reach communities. However, they face a disproportionate amount of risk without adequate support and resources, both physical and structural, from the international community. There is a need to prioritise responsible partnership principles, including prioritizing partner safety by providing physical and technical safety and security materials and resources (for example—rubber boots with metal tracks to prevent slipping accidents, petrol/diesel fuel, generators, life jackets that can support volunteers wearing ~20 kilograms of PPE, and boats (including rubber/inflatable boats).

### d. Plan for and address the long-term consequences of flooding

The Kakhovka Dam collapse and ensuing flooding are likely to have long-term consequences for the region. NP calls on the international community to prepare for long-term measures to address consequences of flooding, including health risks due to chemical exposure, risks to nuclear and chemical facilities, ecological repercussions, agricultural loss, and the civilian protection concerns that arise with these issues. The sector must prioritize the dissemination of information on personal protection and skin rashes, as well as preparation for potential long-term health risks such as cholera.





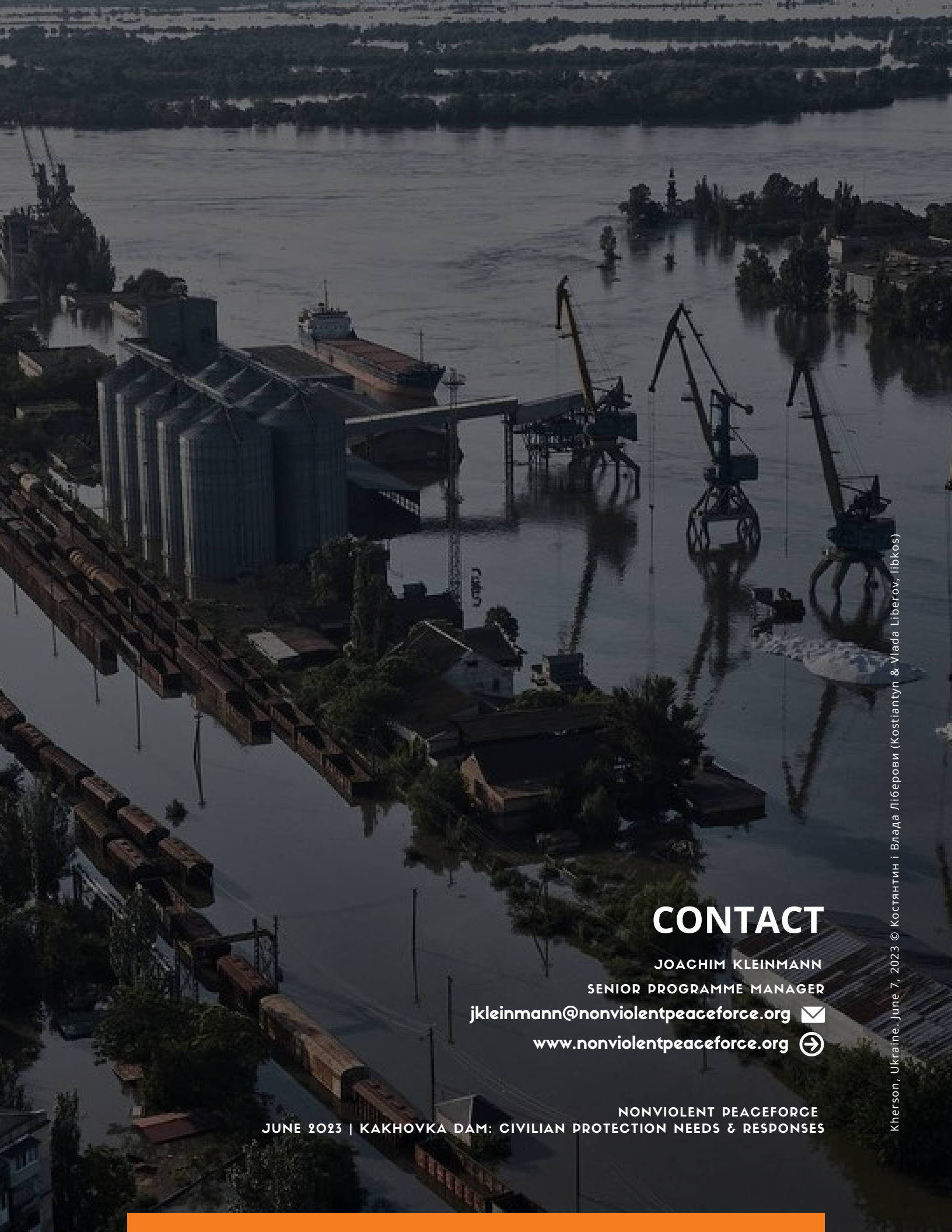
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### e. Elevate local efforts to address UXOs

Since there are currently no international mine action partners operating in Kherson, direct demining responses are limited to Ukrainian emergency services. This situation arises from the restricted geographical jurisdiction of international actors, as mandates preclude them from operating in areas prone to recontamination. Therefore, it becomes crucial to prioritize local efforts in addressing the issue of UXOs. This includes disseminating vital information on mine safety and providing support for mapping activities. Given the localized nature of the response, empowering local stakeholders becomes even more imperative.

### f. Increase access to information


Humanitarian actors must improve communication with civilians and volunteer collectives. Information about resources must be broadly disseminated to affected civilians and resources to improve communication such as mobile service centres should be created. Furthermore, in light of current electronic communications limitations, information must be shared not only online, but also in analogue form. This includes options like loudspeaker announcements, posters, flyers, and physical schedules for aid distribution.



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