Evacuation and Emerging Threats:
The case of STEEL and what its first-year impacts tell us about civilian protection during modern-day warfare

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STEEL evacuation crew. Druzhkivka. April 2025. ©Yevheniy Khaustov.

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I. Introduction

This impact report assesses the results from the first year of the Ukraine Humanitarian Fund (UHF) funded 'Safe Transport for Emergency Evacuations and Logistics' (STEEL) project, co-implemented by Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) and the Relief Coordination Centre (RCC). In this 19-month long project, RCC is NP's subgrantee but remains the key implementor of the project, while NP provides technical support. Considering the unique nature of STEEL, and that the provision of Armoured Vehicles (AVs) to local partners is rare, NP has conducted this in-depth impact analysis of its first year of implementation as a way of supporting ongoing, adaptive programming.

STEEL was established in response to the frontline shifts experienced in May 2024, the increased usage of Unmanned Aeriel Vehicles (UAVs), both long and short range, and the increased evacuation requests across Kharkiv and Donetsk Oblast in response to this threat. The obstacles and threat levels faced by evacuation crews and civilians wanting to evacuate required protection mechanisms beyond those traditionally used in humanitarian aid programming. This led to advocacy for the provision of AVs to local partners. The STEEL project was developed in direct response to this advocacy with the objective to 'keep evacuation crews and civilians as safe as possible, while minimising the potential harm of evacuation missions.

STEEL is a consortium of seven local actors, whose staff have undergone in-depth first aid and evacuation trainings. Collaboratively operating six AVs and two ambulances, they represent an example of well-equipped and highly qualified evacuation crews capable of serving civilians in the most remote frontline areas, while effectively mitigating safety and security risks.

This report demonstrates why the STEEL modality is relevant and impactful in the current environment and makes the case for its continuation and expansion, specifically focusing on the increased threat of UAVs. It also explores key lessons learned so far, with a view to adapting future programming accordingly, and offering guidance to other implementation actors.

II. Methodology

This impact report is based on an analysis of 261 key informant interviews (KIIs) conducted with civilians evacuated from Kharkivska and Donetska oblasts through the STEEL initiative, collected between April and July 2025. In addition, 20 survey responses were gathered from staff of national NGOs (NNGOs), civil society organisations (CSOs), and volunteer collectives who participated in STEEL either as part of the management team or as evacuation crew members. Pre and post tests after all trainings were also analysed. Finally, in September 2025 —marking the one-year anniversary of STEEL—NP conducted an *'After Action Review'*[1] with all consortium members to assess implementation and outcomes over the past year, drawing on findings from the KIIs and staff surveys as the basis for structured reflection and discussion.

III. The Needs that Started STEEL

Volunteers will go to the frontline regardless, then why not go as safely as possible?
- Yevhen Koliada, Head of the Relief Coordination Centre (RCC)

The STEEL project was designed in September 2024, based on the experience of mass evacuation of over 12,000 civilians from the Kharkiv region over the summer of 2024, when an average of 600 strikes (artillery and UAVs) a month in March and April, skyrocketed to 2000 in May. The Russian offensive operation triggered a new wave of civilian displacement with daily announcements of new communities added to the 'mandatory evacuation' list issued by the Ukrainian government. Even though the war had been ongoing for over two years at this point, handling emergency response at this scale represented a critical challenge for the local authorities, INGOs, local partners and first responders.

> 'From one day to another, I had to leave my home. I did not know what to bring, who would take me, where they would drop me. The authorities said they would come and get me, they never came - I do not know why, maybe there were too many strikes? I did not care because I did not want to leave. Then they came, I had not even packed and had only 10 minutes to go. Then after staying at 3 different shelters, I ended up here. I want to go back'.
>
> - Iryna, 68 from Kupiansk at a collective site in Kharkiv

1. An 'After Action Review' is a common Monitor and Evaluation (M&E) practice for INGOs to assess results of a project, comparing what should have happened to what happened. The purpose is to identify gaps in programming and how to improve ahead of the next implementation period.

In addition, volunteers and evacuees faced significant risk of drone and artillery strikes. Thirty percent of the attacks during the Russian offensive were UAVs, both long and short-range types, resulting in seven humanitarian workers from NNGOs/ local volunteer collectives killed during evacuation missions (Conflict & Humanitarian Data Centre, 2025).

Traditionally, humanitarian evacuations in Ukraine have relied on soft-skinned vehicles, which are highly vulnerable to drone strikes. With a pattern of regular targeting of civilian objects and vehicles, whether branded with humanitarian visibility or not, local responders and evacuees were exposed to an increased probability of severe injury. As such, providing local frontline volunteers with AVs is an appropriate response to the type of weaponry used and indiscriminate targeting observed. While AVs do not mitigate all risks faced during evacuation missions, they significantly reduce harm done, even in case of a direct hit during a mission, while at the same time enabling access to areas previously considered unreachable under standard security protocols.

Local networks engaging in civilian evacuations are committed to continuing their operations regardless of the assets available to support their safety Ensuring that this process is conducted as safely as possible is a form of *duty of care* for local authorities and INGOs dependent on local actors to perform this critical humanitarian function. The provision of AVs is a form of civilian protection.

Drone awareness training. Kyiv, 2025. ©Safer Access.

What is STEEL and how does it work?

STEEL is a local consortium composed of seven partner organisations based in Donetska, Dnipropetrovska, Sumska, and Kharkivska oblasts. Partners were selected based on their strong operational experience and existing community relationships. The consortium's purpose is to establish a wide-reaching, rapid-response model, primarily across Donetska and Kharkivska oblasts. Given the large geographic area, strategic positioning in Dnipro and Sumy enables quicker and more efficient responses to evacuation requests. Thus far, the STEEL fleet consists of six armoured pick-up vehicles and two ambulances.

RCC serves as the consortium lead and the owner of all vehicles. RCC receives evacuation requests through its hotline and assigns them to consortium members based on location and capacity. Requests are logged, verified, and transferred to the STEEL team leader (present in every organisation of the Steel Consortium), who then develops a mission plan. This includes determining the safest routes, identifying transfer points and transit centres, and assessing potential risks in coordination with military and police partners. Each evacuation mission deploys at least two AVs connected via Starlink, ensuring maximum safety for crews and evacuees — a model successfully demonstrated during the AV training.

This collaborative structure has enabled the consortium to remain flexible and resilient, adapting quickly to shifting frontlines and large-scale evacuation demands. Through close coordination with Regional Military Administrations, the National Police, and local partners, STEEL has maintained uninterrupted evacuation operations even in highly volatile conditions.

IV. Preparation for Evacuation Missions

STEEL is a response body suited to respond to and address emergencies while keeping volunteers as safe as possible. To ensure the highest possible quality of response, the first step to implementing the STEEL project was ensuring that civilians were aware of these services. RCC disseminated information about the availability of their free services throughout Kharkiv and Donetsk Oblasts using Standard Messaging Service (SMS) notifications, printed leaflets, as well as direct community outreach sessions. These are complemented by updates through local media outlets and online channels, which are widely used in frontline regions. These messages were disseminated in collaboration with local police and the State Emergency

Service of Ukraine (SESU). The purpose of this approach is not only to ensure that information about evacuation opportunities reaches as many people as possible, but also to address the most common fears and doubts expressed by civilians. While STEEL was never intended to create pull-factors for civilian evacuations, there was an underlying assumption that if evacuations were safer, more civilians would consider this option. However, throughout the past year we have not seen any evidence for this assumption. No one has reported that the option of being evacuated through an AV has increased their appetite to relocate. Similarly, most evacuees reported that they are not aware of this option to begin with, as the leaflets and information dissemination material all raise awareness of RCC's evacuation hotline but do not specifically outline STEEL as a project (see pictures below). This lack of visibility and information about STEEL for civilian participants is a gap to be addressed in the future implementation of the project.

Before deployment, all STEEL volunteers underwent extensive training to prepare for evacuation missions. A professional team of over 20 trained volunteers and specialists was established, each completing modules on operating in high-threat environments. Training covered emergency driving of armoured vehicles and vehicle operation under fire and in difficult terrain, the evacuation of individuals with limited mobility, tactical first aid for conflict-related injuries, and Early Warning / Early Response (EWER) procedures.

The impact of the programme was reflected in volunteer testimonies. Participants consistently reported greater confidence, preparedness, and reduced anxiety before missions. One volunteer from Kharkiv noted that specialised armoured driving sessions replaced fear with focus, enabling him to make life-saving decisions while on mission. Similarly, a volunteer from Donetsk described how mobility-focused training allowed her to safely assist elderly and disabled civilians — a task she had previously felt unprepared for.

First aid and EWER components were highlighted as particularly valuable. Volunteers reported feeling equipped to control bleeding, treat trauma injuries, and respond calmly during attacks. EWER sessions helped them recognise early indicators of threats such as drone activity or incoming shelling, improving their ability to adapt and increasing the overall safety of missions.

Drone awareness training. Kyiv, 2025. ©Safer Access.

V. Evacuations

Since February 2024, STEEL has conducted 181 evacuation missions, assisting 922 civilians — including 361 men, 561 women, 60 children, 465 elderly people, and 151 persons with disabilities.

Operations have primarily focused on Kharkiv and Donetsk oblasts, where ongoing hostilities continue to generate urgent evacuation needs. In Kharkiv, Kupiansk remains one of the most dangerous areas, with all routes exposed to drone surveillance and frequent shelling. Missions in this environment demand meticulous planning, strict adherence to security protocols, and highly trained teams capable of operating under constant threat — reflecting both the extreme risks faced by civilians and the professionalism of STEEL's responders.

The Consortium's capacity to scale up and adapt was demonstrated during two major operations in 2025. In the spring, STEEL rapidly mobilised to support a mass evacuation in Sumy oblast. Later, in July, a large-scale operation in Donetsk required full deployment of all available assets — vehicles, volunteers, and communications systems — to maintain continuous evacuations from frontline areas. This approach is replicable, offering valuable lessons for scaling up secure evacuation operations across other conflict-affected regions.

CASE STUDY

Beyond numbers and indicators, the STEEL project's real impact is best reflected in the individual stories of those who were evacuated:

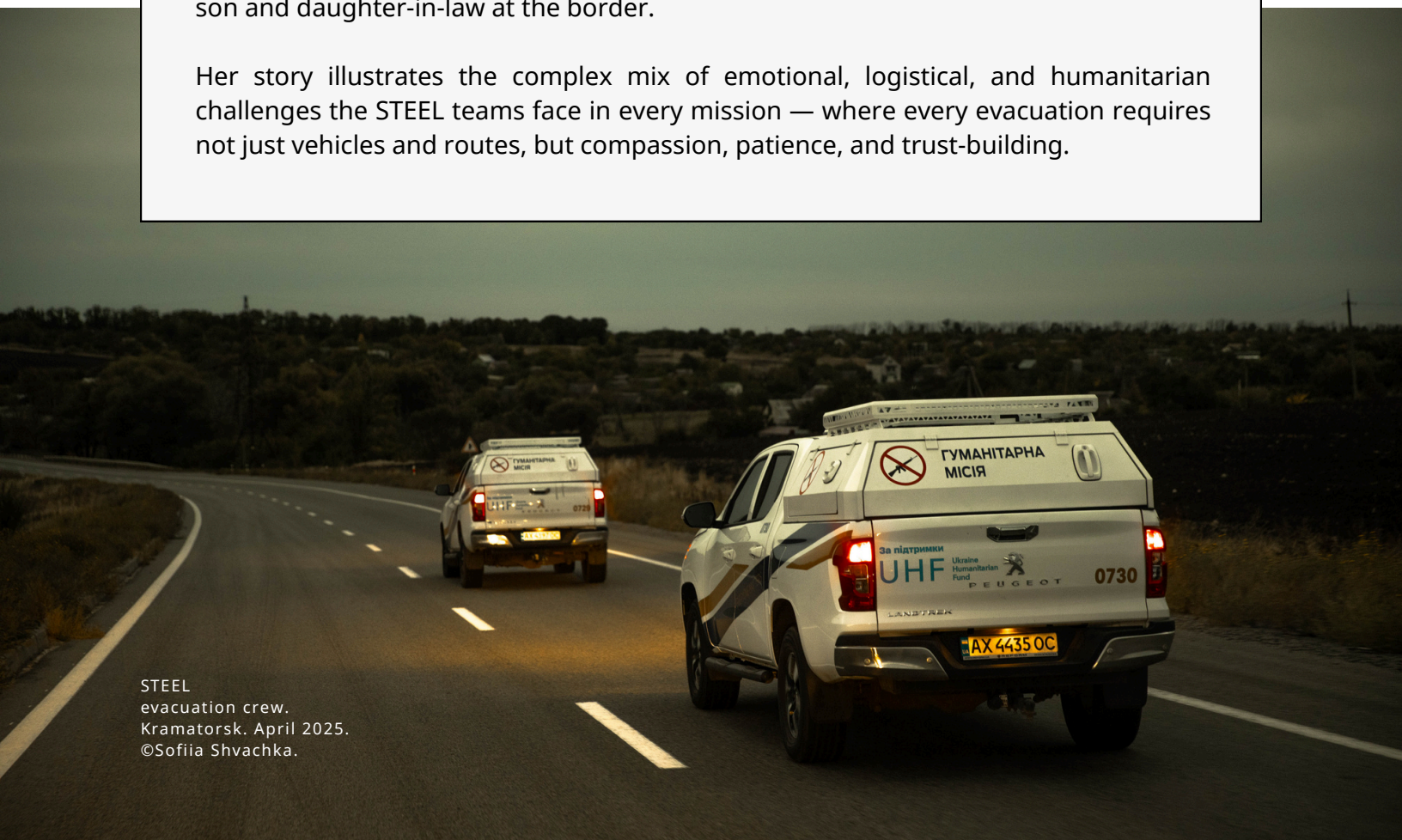
Yulia*, Evacuee – Dobropillia, Donetska Oblast

For months, Yuliia from Dobropillia lived in her basement with her cat and dog, enduring constant shelling and deteriorating living conditions. Even after losing access to water and electricity, she refused to leave her home. On 12 August 2025, her children — who live abroad — submitted an evacuation request through the RCC hotline.

Reaching Yuliia proved difficult: communication disruptions prevented her children from contacting her directly, and volunteers had to spend considerable time persuading her to accept evacuation. She finally agreed after being assured that her pets would be cared for.

At the transit centre in Pavlohrad, Yuliia received psychological support to help her recover from months of isolation and trauma. Volunteers then coordinated for several days to arrange safe onward travel until Tetiana was finally reunited with her son and daughter-in-law at the border.

Her story illustrates the complex mix of emotional, logistical, and humanitarian challenges the STEEL teams face in every mission — where every evacuation requires not just vehicles and routes, but compassion, patience, and trust-building.



STEEL
evacuation crew.
Kramatorsk. April 2025.
©Sofiia Shvachka.

STEEL
evacuation crew.
Druzhkivka. April 2025.
©Yevheniy Khaustov.

Viktoriya*, Evacuee – Krovne, Sumy Oblast

As conditions worsened in her village, Viktoriya often thought about leaving for her parents' home in Sumy yet fear of abandoning her land and everything she had built kept her from going. Despite repeated offers of evacuation support, she consistently refused to leave.

When STEEL volunteers later arrived in her village as part of an information mission, again declined. But one night of heavy shelling finally changed her mind. The next morning, she contacted the team, who immediately helped her and the children pack and evacuated them to the nearest transit centre.
There, they received humanitarian and cash assistance before being safely transported to Sumy, where they were reunited with family. Reflecting on her experience, Viktoriya said:

"I am sincerely grateful to everyone who helped us. The volunteers treated us with great care."

Her story shows how the decision to evacuate is never simple — it is shaped by fear, attachment, and resilience — and how patient engagement and empathy remain at the heart of STEEL's work.

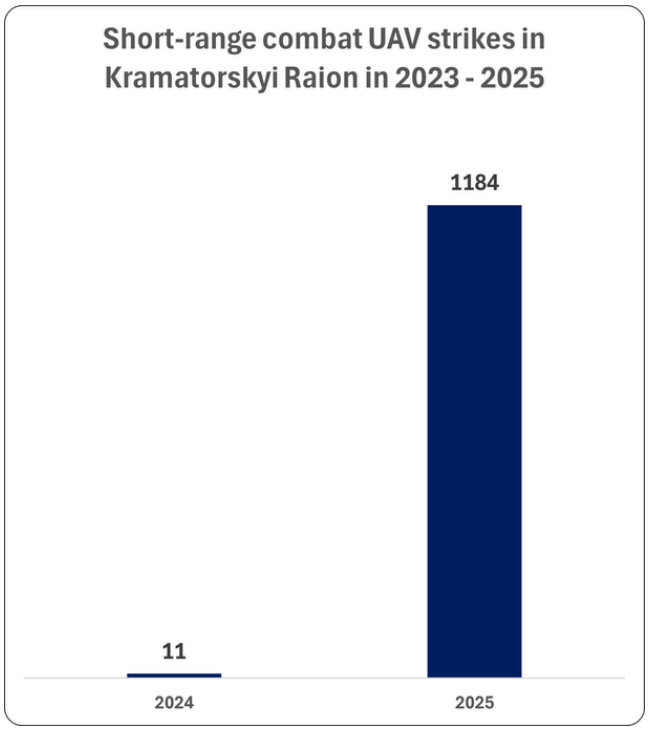
**Names anonymized for security and privacy*

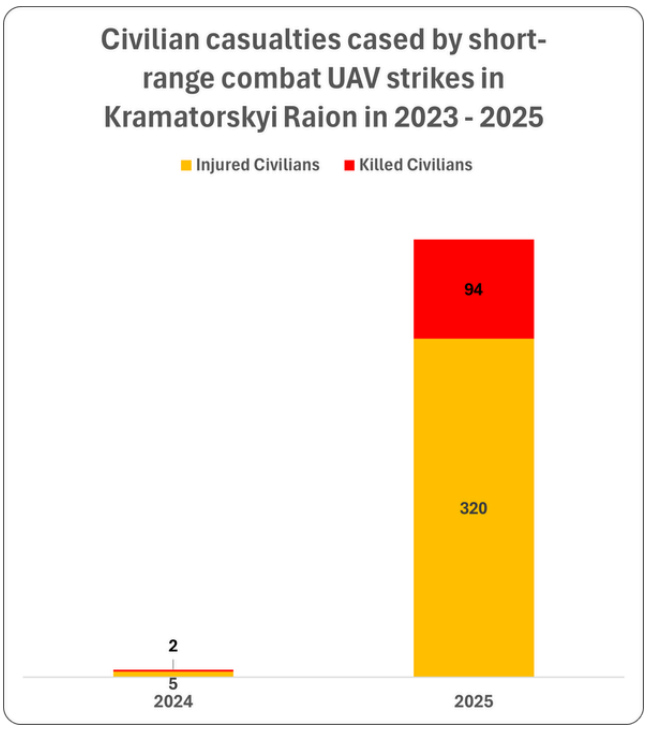
VI. Looking Forward

Over a year since STEEL's establishment the need for its continuation has never been greater. The data presented below, derived from INSO's database, illustrates a sharp increase in UAV activity in Donetska and Kharkivska since May 2024 and subsequently the increase in number of casualties among humanitarian workers, volunteers, and civilians from UAVs.

As the graphs demonstrate, spikes in UAV activity are consistently followed by corresponding increases in casualties, revealing a strong and accelerating relationship between the two.[1] In several oblasts, the trend approaches a ratio of one UAV incident to three to five related casualties, suggesting that the humanitarian cost of increased drone warfare is not linear but exponential. A major enhancement to the STEEL modality, to adapt to the changing context has been the introduction of frequency analysers, a tool designed to detect and monitor drone activity in real time. Following a series of targeted attacks in mid-2025, this technology was introduced in Kharkiv and Donetsk as a pilot measure—enabling evacuation teams to identify UAV threats early, adjust routes dynamically, and avoid several potential incidents. Building on this, frequency analysers are now becoming standard equipment for all evacuation missions.

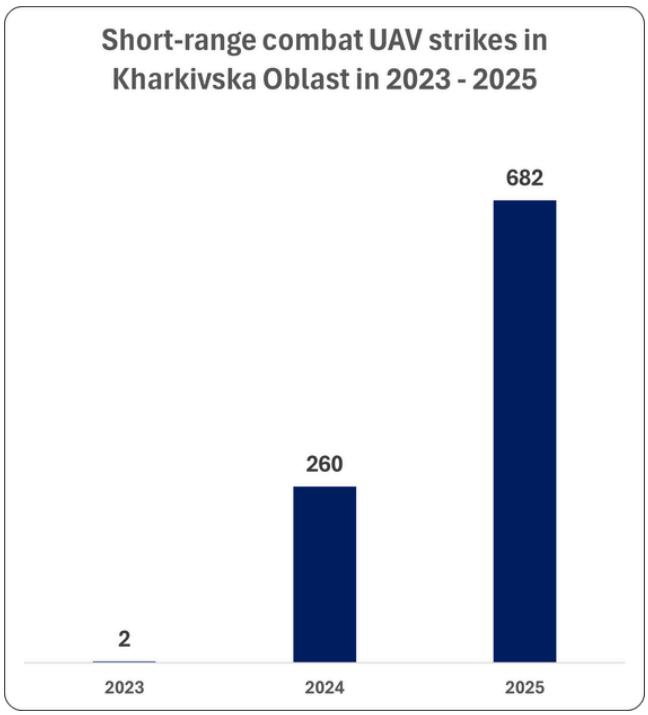
Donetsk • Kramatorskyi Raion

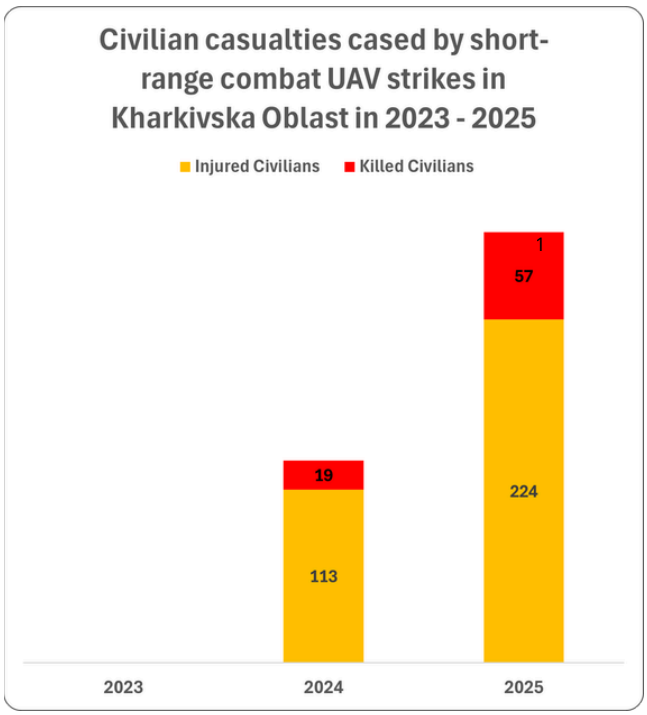




Information taken from INSO's Conflict & Humanitarian Data Centre (CHDC)

Kharkiv • Kharkivska Oblast





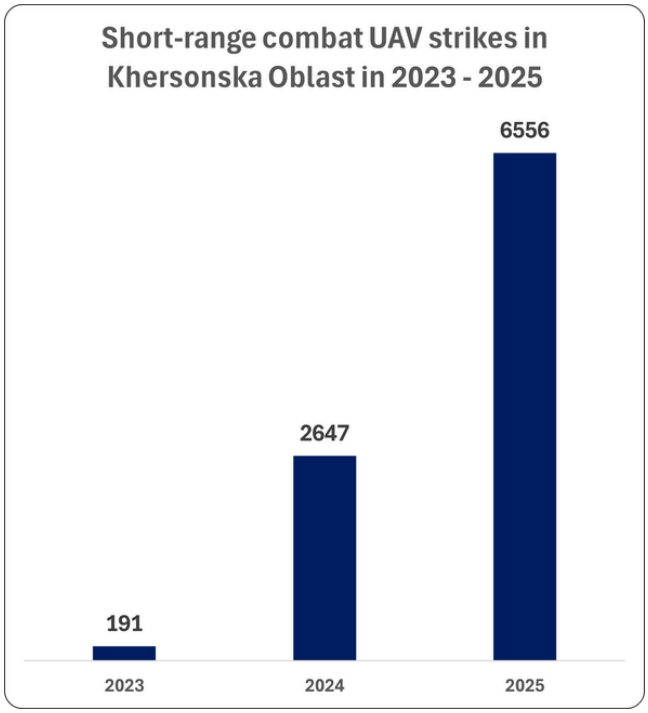
Information taken from INSO's Conflict & Humanitarian Data Centre (CHDC)

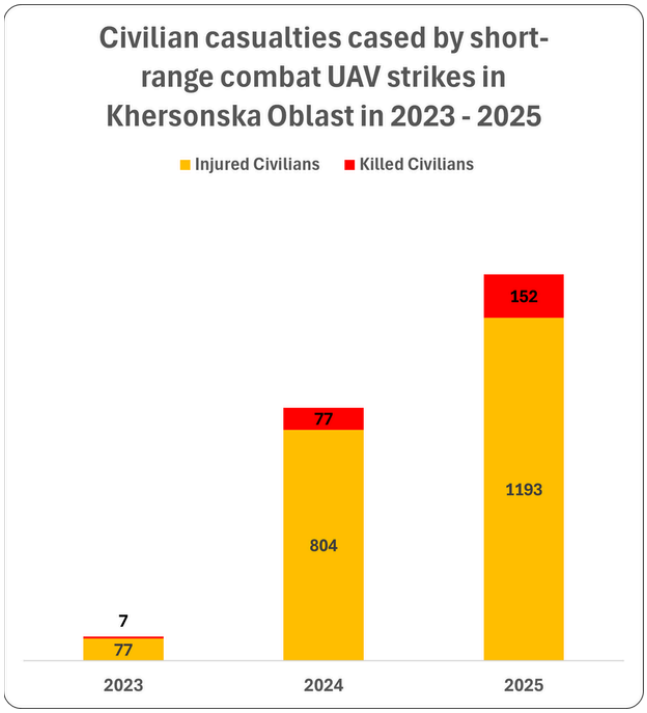
These findings underscore the urgent need for continued and expanded support to STEEL, whose protected assets and trained evacuation teams remain among the few mechanisms capable of operating safely under such evolving threat conditions.

To ensure safe and responsible use, each device is distributed only after completion of specialised Drone Awareness Training (DAT), developed and delivered jointly by NP and Safer Access. This mirrors NP's rigorous training approach across all operational modalities. To date, NP and RCC have trained the entire consortium and an additional 160 frontline volunteers on the use of frequency analysers, ensuring consistent technical competence across teams.

Furthermore, as Khersonska oblast experiences intensified hostilities—including frequent indiscriminate drone strikes and shelling—there is a growing need for secure, well-coordinated evacuation services in that region. While the volume of evacuation requests in Khersonska remains lower than that in Donetska and Kharkivska, its frontline status means that areas can rapidly become subject to mandatory evacuation orders following sudden escalations in hostilities. This was evident in October, when the destruction of the Korabel bridge triggered a renewed wave of civilian evacuations. During this period, numerous national NGOs supported evacuation efforts without adequate protection against Short-range ICUAV (Improvised Combat Unmanned Aerial Vehicles) drone threats–exposing both responders and civilians to heightened risk.

Kherson • Khersonska Oblast





Information taken from INSO's Conflict & Humanitarian Data Centre (CHDC)

In response, NP is expanding the STEEL modality to Khersonska oblast under continued funding from the UHF. In southern Ukraine, the STEEL Consortium will be led by the local organisation Bridge of Unity (BoU), operating under the same core principles and guidelines as the existing STEEL model in the East.

VII. Conclusion and Recommendations

As conflict dynamics continue to shift and intensify, the need for protected, coordinated evacuation mechanisms is only growing—demonstrating both the continued relevance and the potential for expansion of the STEEL model.

Based on the first year of implementation, several areas for improvement emerged, particularly around technical and logistical preparedness, operational capacity, and visibility. Addressing these gaps will be essential to ensure that STEEL remains effective, sustainable, and responsive to the realities of frontline humanitarian operations. These lessons learned also provide guidance for donors and implementing actors supporting this kind of programming in Ukraine and beyond:

STEEL evacuation crew. Druzhkivka. April 2025. ©Yevheniy Khaustov.

1

Technical and Logistical Preparedness

Repeated damage to AVs during evacuation missions exposed gaps in technical planning. Incident analysis identified common mechanical failures, leading to the additional procurement of spare tyres, and key parts. This could have been considered during the project design phase.

Connectivity also posed persistent challenges. AVs lacked GPS tracking and reliable communication systems, forcing reliance on mobile phones that often-lost signal. Ensuring each AV is equipped with GPS trackers, VHF radios, and backup communication devices would greatly enhance operational safety and coordination.

2

Capacity Building

Although STEEL teams received comprehensive initial training, regular refresher sessions should have been planned for – something that became evident throughout the year. Crew members themselves emphasised the need for ongoing training to keep skills fresh, avoid overconfidence, and reinforce safety protocols.

3

Visibility

Visibility of the STEEL project among civilians remains limited, with many evacuees unaware of the added protection of AVs that had facilitated their evacuation. As a result, NP cannot yet assess whether the project has influenced civilians' willingness to evacuate, since all key informant interviews indicated that beneficiaries did not recognise STEEL as the implementing entity. Strengthening the project's visibility through consistent branding, public information materials, and community outreach will be essential to build recognition, trust, and a clearer public understanding of the Consortium's role.

The STEEL model has proven highly effective in mitigating risks that traditional soft-skinned vehicles cannot address. AVs drastically reduce vulnerability to artillery, drones, and small-arms fire, enabling safer access to exposed locations where standard operations are infeasible. Evidence from over 160 missions shows a marked increase in evacuation efficiency and safety for both civilians and responders. INGOs operating in frontline areas should prioritise AV integration, starting with pilot programmes in their regions, while sharing best practices through humanitarian clusters. This replication could create a nationwide network of secure evacuation capabilities, fostering interoperability and resource-sharing among actors.