



Flood and Fire: Russia's Disruption of Emergency Response in Ukraine after the Destruction of the Kakhovka Dam



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Abbreviations

AFU	Armed Forces of Ukraine
HPP	hydroelectric power plant
IHL	international humanitarian law
MES	Ministry of Civil Defence, Emergencies and Disaster Relief of the Russian Federation
NGO	nongovernmental organization
NORSAR	Norwegian Seismic Array
PEJ	Project Expedite Justice
SES	State Emergency Services of Ukraine
URCS	Ukrainian Red Cross Society

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On June 6, 2023, the destruction of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP) unleashed a vast humanitarian and environmental disaster across southern Ukraine. Floodwaters swept through communities on both banks of the Dnipro River, submerging homes, trapping civilians, destroying livelihoods, and leaving thousands of people in urgent need of rescue, food, water, medical care, and evacuation. The disaster struck a frontline area where Ukrainian and Russian forces are separated only by the Dnipro River. That fact shaped every hour of the emergency response.

Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, expanding a war that began in 2014 with Russia's occupation of Crimea and the outbreak of fighting in eastern Ukraine. In June 2023, Russian forces controlled parts of Kherson Oblast, namely areas on the left bank of the Dnipro River. Between June 6 and mid-June 2023, the Lower Dnipro area became the site of the largest emergency operation of Russia's war against Ukraine.

This report examines how Russian forces and occupation authorities disrupted, obstructed, and endangered volunteer emergency rescue efforts after the destruction of the Kakhovka dam. It focuses on the people who assisted state emergency services and saved lives in the days that followed: Ukrainian Red Cross Society (URCS) teams, NGO staff, and ordinary local residents. Available evidence indicates that Russian forces' and occupation authorities' actions in response to the destruction of the Kakhovka HPP raise serious concerns under international humanitarian law (IHL), including potential violations of the rules protecting civilians, humanitarian relief, civil defense, and people living under occupation.

On the Ukrainian-controlled right bank of the Dnipro, emergency responders and volunteers began evacuations within hours. They supported overburdened state services by directly participating in rescue operations, providing targeted assistance to specific populations, such as the elderly and people with disabilities or mobility issues, and coordinating among actors.

Russian forces repeatedly shelled areas where these rescue operations took place. Volunteers interviewed by Truth Hounds described mortar and artillery fire near evacuation points, boats, flooded residential streets, and clearly marked emergency responders. One such incident, documented for this report, occurred around Kherson's Korabelna Square, one of the city's most important evacuation points. It injured nine civilians, including two State Emergency Service (SES) responders and a police officer. In general, volunteers said that uniforms, and humanitarian markings did not protect them. In some cases, they feared that visible markings made them more vulnerable.

These attacks slowed evacuations, forced responders to suspend or reroute missions, left civilians waiting in flooded homes, and deepened panic among people already trapped by rising water. Even when shelling did not kill or injure responders, it forced them to make impossible choices about when to move, whom to rescue first, and how much risk to accept.

On the Russian-occupied left bank, where the flood caused the greatest damage, Russian occupation authorities failed to organize an adequate emergency response in the crucial first days after the dam's destruction. Witnesses told Truth Hounds that local residents had to rescue

one another because official help did not arrive. Community members used private boats, inflatable mattresses, and improvised tools to rescue people stranded on rooftops, in attics, and inside collapsing homes without the benefit of trained rescue personnel. Telegram chats and especially personal networks served as indispensable means of communication, especially when mobile networks were not functioning properly.

Witnesses shared how Russian forces and occupation authorities not only failed to provide an effective rescue operation, but in some cases obstructed civilian rescue efforts and downplayed the scale of the disaster in public communication while civilians remained trapped. Russian forces and occupation authorities confiscated boats and engines, restricted movement, blocked access to flooded areas, prevented some outside volunteers from entering affected towns, and, in some cases, conditioned help on possession of Russian passports or payment.

The human cost of this tragedy remains difficult to calculate, especially in areas under Russian occupation. Ukrainian authorities reported 32 deaths and 39 missing people on the right bank one year after the disaster.¹ The true toll on the left bank remains unknown because independent monitors and humanitarian organizations lack access to the occupied territories.

The Kakhovka case shows how the weaponization of water can become even more deadly when a party to an armed conflict attacks or obstructs emergency response. The flood created immediate danger, but the harm was not fixed at the moment of detonation. It unfolded during a response window in which rescue, evacuation, medical care, and humanitarian assistance could still save lives. Russian attacks and obstruction kept responders from making effective use of that window on both banks of the Dnipro, magnifying and extending the danger well beyond what the breach itself produced.

IHL requires parties to a conflict to distinguish civilians from combatants, to take constant care to spare civilians, and to facilitate humanitarian relief for civilians in need. It also protects humanitarian personnel and civil defense operations. Russian forces violated these basic principles when

they attacked areas where emergency responders and volunteers carried out evacuations and when they interfered with civilian rescue efforts in occupied territory. The documented pattern also raises serious concerns that Russian forces may have used disaster-induced vulnerability as a weapon, turning civilians' urgent need for rescue into another harm.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To accountability and justice actors at the national and international levels

- Continue systematic documentation of attacks on emergency responders and obstruction of rescue operations during the Kakhovka response, including the cases on the occupied left bank, to build evidentiary records capable of supporting criminal proceedings at the national and international levels;
- In investigations into the destruction of the Kakhovka HPP, examine Russian forces' and occupation authorities' conduct during the response phase, including attacks on responders on the right bank and obstruction of rescue on the occupied left bank. This conduct should form part of an integrated factual record, as it may indicate an intent to maximize civilian harm or a failure to prevent foreseeable harm during the response phase.

To the United Nations

- Use existing mechanisms, including the Human Rights Council, OHCHR, and the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, to examine the conduct of Russian forces and occupation authorities during the Kakhovka response as part of broader monitoring of attacks on civilians and humanitarian operations;
- Use the platforms of the Secretary-General, the Human Rights Council, and other relevant bodies to call, where appropriate, for time-limited humanitarian pauses to enable search-and-rescue and essential humanitarian assistance.

To national and international civil defense and humanitarian organizations

- Integrate lessons from the Kakhovka response into training for operations during armed conflict, especially emergencies involving destroyed infrastructure and large-scale environmental harm. Training should address how professional services can coordinate with spontaneous civilian volunteer networks in areas exposed to shelling.

To the academic, research, and human rights communities

- Examine attacks during large-scale environmental shocks as a distinct object of study within the broader literature on attacks on first responders. Such research should aim to identify recurring patterns across conflicts, develop indicators to distinguish incidental from deliberate disruption, and clarify the relationships between the various provisions of IHL that apply in such cases;
- Investigate the actions of the parties to a conflict within the "response window" – the period during which an emergency has not yet reached the peak of its destructive impact. In particular, to analyze the extent to which such actions facilitated or hindered the conduct of rescue operations, the delivery of humanitarian assistance, and the minimization of harm to civilian population, as well as which legal and operational frameworks are capable of ensuring the effective use of this period amid ongoing hostilities.

METHODOLOGY

This report builds on two earlier Truth Hounds studies. The first, **"SUBMERGED,"** published with PEJ, examined how the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam caused catastrophic civilian, agricultural, and environmental harm in southern Ukraine. The report concludes that there is a reasonable basis to attribute the dam's destruction to Russian forces and frames the incident as a potential environmental war crime.²

The second report, **"CALCULATED HARM,"** analyzed attacks on emergency responders during Russia's full-scale invasion.³ Truth Hounds found that Russian attacks on Ukrainian emergency responders form a sustained pattern that has killed and injured civil defense personnel, damaged fire stations and emergency vehicles, disrupted rescue operations, and weakened civilian protection. The report concludes that these attacks may amount to war crimes and that some incidents may also violate the IHL prohibition on acts or threats of violence whose primary purpose is to spread terror among the civilian population.

This report draws on both previous studies to examine the narrower question of whether and how Russian forces and occupation authorities obstructed emergency operations after the Kakhovka Dam's destruction. In doing so, it pays particular attention to volunteer efforts that complemented the state response.

For this study, the research team used three categories of volunteer emergency responders. The term "independent volunteer" refers to a civilian with no formal affiliation with a humanitarian organization who joins search-and-rescue operations on their own initiative, using their own resources.

"NGO volunteer" refers to a civilian who carries out search-and-rescue work on behalf of, and with support from, a nongovernmental organization. The term "URCS responder" refers to a civilian who participates in search-and-rescue operations on behalf of the URCS, either as a volunteer or as an employee.

During a field mission to Kherson and Mykolaiv Oblasts from June 11 to 16, 2025, researchers conducted 10 semi-structured interviews in Ukrainian and Russian: four with independent and NGO volunteers, three with URCS responders, and three with volunteers from Russian-occupied areas who had since reached Ukrainian-controlled territory. The research team anonymized all identifying information to protect interviewees.

The interviews were conducted two years after the tragedy. On the one hand, this allowed respondents to critically reflect on their experiences and identify the most important details. On the other hand, such a long time span may have affected their ability to recall certain events. Accordingly, where possible, the team cross-checked factual information from testimonies against open-source reports. This made it possible to reconstruct a more complete and coherent picture of events. At the same time, eyewitness accounts remain the primary source of information, as they capture aspects that cannot be documented through open sources.

Truth Hounds also reviewed secondary sources, including reports by Ukrainian and international organizations and public statements by Ukrainian, Russian, and occupation officials. Since the study draws primarily on testimonies and open sources,

it is subject to limitations, especially regarding data from occupied territories, to which independent human rights organizations lack access. While the research team took measures to minimize inaccuracies and present as complete a picture as possible, further analysis is needed to document particular incidents in depth and examine them from a legal perspective.

BACKGROUND

On 6 June 2023, between 2 a.m. and 3 a.m., a series of explosions occurred near the Kakhovka HPP, which was under Russian control at the time.⁴ Residents of the surrounding localities reported hearing the blasts.⁵ NORSAR stations in Ukraine and Romania recorded seismic signals consistent with explosions.⁶ Shortly thereafter, a number of Russian Telegram channels reported the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam. In the morning, both Ukrainian and Russian sources stated that the facility was beyond repair.⁷

According to the Truth Hounds and PEJ report, between June 6 and 9, the collapse of the dam released water from the Kakhovka reservoir, flooding 405 square kilometers of land.⁸ Entire neighborhoods ended up underwater.

Flooding affected the left bank of the Dnipro most severely, as it lies at a lower elevation than the right one, particularly the occupied towns of Oleshky and Hola Prystan, Kherson Oblast.⁹ On the right bank, in Ukrainian-controlled territory, the most affected areas were some districts of Kherson city and surrounding villages. The flooding also affected Mykolaiv Oblast. In parts of Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporizhzhia Oblasts, the drainage of the reservoir temporarily disrupted centralized water supplies and irrigation in arid areas.¹⁰

According to the information provided by the then-head of the press office of the Kherson Oblast Military Administration, Oleksandr Tolokonnikov, as of 6 June 2024, 32 people were reported dead, and 39 more were considered missing on the right bank of the river.¹¹ The head of the Kherson Oblast occupation administration, Volodymyr Saldo, a year after the destruction of the dam, acknowledged the death of at least 60 people.¹² However, on the

first day of the catastrophe, when the water level had not yet reached its peak, the Russian news agency TASS had already reported 57 deaths and 175 hospitalizations.¹³ These discrepancies suggest that the actual number of victims remains uncertain and likely underreported.

⁴ In the report "[Submerged. Study of the Destruction of the Kakhovka Dam and Its Impacts on Ecosystems, Agrarians, Other Civilians, and International Justice](#)," we examine three possible scenarios that could have led to the dam's destruction, including those circulated in Russian sources attributing the incident to the dam's deterioration or to shelling by Ukrainian forces. After analyzing a substantial body of evidence, we present arguments demonstrating why these versions do not withstand scrutiny, and we substantiate the existence of compelling grounds to conclude that the dam was blown up by the Russian side. For more on Russian narratives regarding the destruction of the Kakhovka HPP.

CHAPTER 1

HOW DID VOLUNTEERS BECOME CENTRAL TO THE KAKHOVKA EMERGENCY RESPONSE?

Examining the emergency response after the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam remains critical because the disaster did not end with the collapse of the dam. The flood created an immediate threat to civilians on both banks of the Dnipro, while the conduct of Russian forces and occupation authorities shaped how, when, and whether people could receive help. The scale of the flooding made volunteer participation essential. Russian attacks placed rescue operations on the right bank under direct threat, while Russian obstruction in occupied areas left many civilians dependent on improvised local rescue efforts. These factors make the Kakhovka response a distinct civilian protection issue and an important case for assessing how emergency operations can become sites of harm during armed conflict.

The role of volunteers deserves particular attention. Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion, volunteers have regularly worked alongside state emergency services to respond to attacks and other war-related emergencies. Yet, broader discussions of civilian protection often overlook their work. Volunteers have become especially important in areas where state services cannot respond quickly or safely.¹⁴ Volunteers and URCS personnel regularly assist survivors after shelling in coordination with the SES, while local and volunteer firefighters carry out a significant share of emergency work in remote areas, particularly near the frontline. Trained volunteers can also play a critical role during large-scale crises or when complex logistics, limited technical capacity, occupation policies, or other constraints prevent government services from reaching civilians.

Three features of the Kakhovka response explain the conditions under which volunteers became central to the emergency response.

First, the geographic scale of the damage made the participation of volunteers not only desirable but necessary. In most situations, state emergency responders have sufficient resources to contain the danger and provide assistance to those affected; accordingly, the participation of civilians without proper training in emergency response is usually neither necessary nor recommended due to safety risks. However, the sudden and irrevocable destruction of the Kakhovka HPP, the fifth-largest HPP in Ukraine, created an exceptional situation in which state services had to temporarily join forces with civilian volunteers to manage the resulting chaos.

Secondly, the operational conditions under which the emergency response took place increased reliance on volunteers. Russia reportedly shelled the territories of the right bank of the Dnipro from the first day of the flooding.¹⁵ In particular, Russia targeted SES emergency responders and volunteers evacuating people and animals by boat, causing injuries.¹⁶ As this report illustrates, emergency operations, whether carried out by the state or volunteers, can become targets during armed conflicts. Where human and technical resources for rescue operations are limited due to the scale of the disaster, as they were after the destruction of the Kakhovka HPP, such attacks create addi-

tional physical risks and undermine the ability of emergency responders and volunteers to provide timely assistance. This may amplify the atmosphere of chaos and panic among the population and potentially increase civilian casualties.¹⁷

Thirdly, the Kakhovka HPP case enables a direct comparison of how conditions affecting emergency response differed between Ukrainian-controlled and occupied territories. The complete destruction of the dam led to large-scale flooding on both sides of the Dnipro River, but the localities on the left bank suffered the greatest damage. Even so, according to testimony collected by Truth Hounds and other human rights organizations, Russian occupying forces failed to organize the evacuation of the population and, in some cases, actively obstructed the rescue efforts of local volunteers, particularly by confiscating private boats.¹⁸ This likely contributed to a significant number of civilian deaths among those who were unable to leave dangerous areas or receive the necessary medical or humanitarian aid before the water rose.

Together, these features explain why volunteers became central to the emergency response. The scale of the flooding, continued shelling on the right bank, and the absence of organized evacuation efforts during the first days on the occupied left bank, combined with reported obstruction of local initiatives, required volunteers to assume a key role in rescue operations.

¹⁷ Details of specific attacks suffered or witnessed by emergency responders in Kherson Oblast are in [Chapter 3](#).

CHAPTER 2

HOW DID EMERGENCY
OPERATIONS UNFOLD
ON THE RIGHT
BANK, AND WHO
PARTICIPATED?

Emergency response on the Ukrainian-controlled right bank began within hours of the Kakhovka HPP's destruction. As the water rose, state services, the URCS, NGOs, and independent volunteers moved from initial ground evacuations to boat rescues, improvised coordination systems, and round-the-clock assistance for people trapped in flooded areas.

Emergency operations on the right bank of the Dnipro began approximately two to three hours after the explosion at the Kakhovka HPP, on the morning of June 6. According to a URCS employee interviewed by Truth Hounds, the first evacuations from areas of possible flooding in Kherson, specifically from Prychalna Street, began at 5:30 a.m.¹⁹ Because water levels in most at-risk areas remained low in the morning, volunteers and emergency services used regular ground vehicles during the first part of the day. However, closer to the evening, when the flood engulfed the riverbanks of Kherson Oblast, particularly the Beryslav and Kherson raions, various vessels and off-road emergency operations trucks became the only possible means of transportation.²⁰

According to eyewitnesses, coordination between the emergency services (the SES, the police, and medics) and volunteers on the first day after the explosion was limited and haphazard.²¹ Volunteers who had their own boats evacuated people and animals, checking flooded streets by themselves or receiving specific requests with addresses from acquaintances or from social media.²² URCS volunteers and employees initially worked without coordinating, but soon formed a response headquarters composed of different units within the organization, focusing primarily on assistance to low-mobility groups.²³

After June 7, cooperation between different categories of volunteers and emergency services became more organized, although some coordination issues persisted until the end of rescue operations.²⁴ URCS launched a hotline, engaging local volunteers familiar with Kherson's geography to process requests from those affected by flooding. Volunteers also created an interactive Google map with the coordinates of people who needed rescue.²⁵ URCS volunteers and the SES remained on call around the clock at Korabelna Square, one of the most important evacuation

points in the city, coordinating *ad hoc* volunteers and meeting evacuees, who arrived in boats and in SES Bohun 2 off-road vehicles.²⁶ Coordinators then directed survivors to temporary housing and hospitals, as well as to railway stations, where evacuation trains and buses took them to other cities in Ukraine.²⁷

In the first three to four days after Russian forces destroyed the HPP, emergency responders worked around the clock to carry out evacuations and deliver humanitarian aid.



"Each trip, we picked up 2–3 people and also animals. From 9 a.m. until dusk, around 9 p.m. One trip took about an hour or an hour and a half. [...] People also got dry rations and water delivered. Everything was procured by volunteers—we went to their warehouses," a volunteer from Kherson shared with Truth Hounds.²⁸

Shelling and a strong current complicated movement through the city's flooded areas and hindered the movement of vessels with weak engines.



"The first few days, we sailed to Chaikovskoho Street [in the Korabelnyi district of Kherson]. [But our boat] did not have enough power, so the SES had to pull us out. Where there was no strong current, we sailed just fine, but with the current, our boat could not handle it," shared a volunteer from the Strong Because Free NGO.

Emergency operations in Kherson and other localities on the right bank²⁹ continued for about two weeks until the water receded.³⁰ According to one volunteer, from June 9, the SES and other emergency services mostly worked by themselves, in part because the security situation in the flooded areas had deteriorated.³¹ Ukrainian authorities instructed volunteers not to sail if there was a threat of shelling from the Russian side.³²

²⁹ According to the East SOS Charitable Foundation, rural areas along the right bank of the Dnipro river (from village Kozatske to village Stanislav) and along the Inhulets river (Dariivka and Kalynivske communities in Kherson Oblast and Horokhivske and Snihurivka communities in Mykolaiv Oblast) were partly flooded; East SOS (2023). *Aftermath of Kakhovka Dam's Explosion: Report from Monitoring Mission*. P. 2.

However, according to URCS representatives and several independent volunteers, many volunteers continued to work alongside government services until the very end of the active search and rescue phase in mid-June.³³ On June 20, SES spokesman Oleksandr Khorunzhyi reported that rescue services had successfully evacuated 2,783 people, including 309 children and 80 low-mobility individuals, from the Ukrainian-controlled part of Kherson Oblast.³⁴ At the same time, URCS president Pavlo Rozenko stated that as of June 10, the organization had evacuated about 3,000 Kherson residents, including about 200 people with limited mobility.³⁵ As of July 2023, the exact number of evacuees remains unknown and difficult to calculate.

Ukrainian NGOs involved in rescue operations included East SOS (evacuation of civilians, including low-mobility individuals, people with dis-

abilities, the elderly, and families with children), Save Ukraine (evacuation of civilians and animals, humanitarian aid delivery),³⁶ Fight for Right (evacuation of people with disabilities), Caritas Ukraine (evacuation of civilians), Ukraïner (evacuation of civilians), UAnimals (evacuation of animals), and others.³⁷

Evacuation of civilians from the flooded Korabel micro-district of Kherson by an inflatable boat. 7 June, 2023.

Photo by Vladyslav Musiienko /Getty Images



CHAPTER 3

HOW DID SHELLING
AFFECT VOLUNTEER
RESCUE OPERATIONS
ON THE RIGHT BANK?

Russian shelling shaped the emergency response on the Ukrainian-controlled right bank from the first hours after the Kakhovka HPP's destruction. Volunteers and emergency responders entered flooded neighborhoods to evacuate civilians, deliver aid, and transport people to safety, but many did so under mortar and artillery fire. Their testimonies show how shelling delayed rescues, forced responders to change routes or suspend movement, injured civilians and emergency personnel, and made even clearly marked humanitarian and rescue work dangerous.

Of the seven volunteers from the right bank in Kherson Oblast interviewed by Truth Hounds, five said they had witnessed or experienced shelling during emergency operations.³⁸ The URCS employee who began the first evacuation on June 6 at 5:30 a.m., about 2–3 hours after the HPP was destroyed, shared that he came under mortar fire on Prychalna Street in the Korabelnyi district of Kherson as early as 5:40 a.m.

“

“I was picking up a lady and her family, their belongings. They were carrying their stuff, I was in armor, in a helmet, and then—the launch, the whistling sound. I look up, and the lady stands there and goes like, ‘We are used to this, it’s far.’ Just for you to get an idea, ‘far’ was 15 meters away,” shared the emergency responder.³⁹

In addition, the man shared that, on another day, his colleagues came under shelling in the neighborhood of Ostriv, which was severely affected by flooding:

“

“There was a moment when water in Ostriv fully flooded the first floor, the entrance, and we had to take the person down from there. He had a spinal injury, was on painkillers, and the situation was that the injection worked for only two hours. We had to get him out quickly, but the evacuation took almost eight hours because there was shelling and our people just could not get him out. [...] The Russians kept firing, constantly firing.”⁴⁰

As a result of these attacks, a piece of shrapnel hit the bulletproof vest of a URCS volunteer. The volunteer himself was not injured. During the operation, all the team members wore a URCS uniform and displayed the corresponding insignia.⁴¹

An independent volunteer who came to Kherson from another city with his own boat reported that he and his colleagues came under mortar fire during an evacuation in the first days of the rescue operations.

“

“We came under fire during the day, I don’t know exactly which day. I think it was Berehova Street. We stood and waited for people next to the entrance to the building—it was a beautiful, vine-covered entrance. A mortar shell hit a tree, a fragment made quite a big cut on an old man’s head. He was about 90.

There were two other volunteers in the boat. They jumped out of the boat as soon as they heard the whistling sound. It was shallow there, about neck deep. After the strike, I saw the old man’s injury [...].

I called my brother on the shore and said we had an injured person, but there was no ambulance at the evacuation site. I handed him over to soldiers I knew—they had a medic and took him to the hospital in their car. Only then did the ambulance arrive. 20 minutes passed from the moment of injury until the arrival of the medics.

We moored the boat on Chaikovskoho Street, in an alley—that’s where we picked up the old man. I’m sure it was a mortar shell because there was the characteristic whistling sound. At that time, mortars were the most commonly used, as they were quite close to the city itself. At that moment, we only heard the strike. [...] The shell landed about 30–40 meters away from us. It was one shell. None before or after that. Sometimes, during the evacuation process, we drifted on the water and could not approach the point of evacuation because we had to wait for the moment when it was no longer under fire,” shared the volunteer.⁴²

The most significant shelling affecting emergency responders occurred on June 8, when Russian forces struck Korabelna Square with mortar fire. One volunteer interviewed by Truth Hounds called Korabelna Square a “Mecca” for emergency responders. The attack injured nine people, including six civilians, two SES emergency responders, and one police officer.⁴³ A URCS volunteer interviewed by Truth Hounds described how the shelling of Korabelna Square unfolded while volunteers, SES personnel, evacuees, and journalists were gathered at one of Kherson’s main evacuation points:



“It was day two. We were on call along with the SES. This was when the president [Volodymyr Zelenskyy] came to visit Korabelna Square. There were many reporters, a few per evacuee. [...] The first shell hit the water, about 20 meters away from us. We heard the launch, the whistle, and the strike. People and cars scattered around, some under the fence, some under buildings.

Five minutes before that, an elderly couple was brought in. We put them into our car... After the first strike, the two drivers jumped into the car and drove higher up. Another volunteer, who was left without a car, and I ran to higher ground. [...] While we were running, we would hear the whistling and drop to the ground. At one point, we dropped on two sides of a tree, and then a shell landed. I felt rocks falling on me. [...]

Then another shell landed nearby. [...] One woman, a reporter or a civilian, had a panic attack, she started crying hysterically. I started helping her. [...]

My colleague and I were wearing helmets and bulletproof vests, some SES employees weren’t. When there was a whistle, my colleague and I would drop on top of the SES workers and cover them. The shelling went on for at least an hour. [...] After that, there was a recon UAV flying overhead,” shared the volunteer.⁴⁴

A volunteer of the Strong Because Free NGO witnessed the shelling of Korabelna Square from a distance:



“We were just sailing in the area. We came up to a house and saw a man who was standing on the third floor and smoking. We say, ‘Get down, we’ll take you to dry land.’ He says, ‘No, I’m fine here.’ Once we sail away, maybe 30–40 meters, we hear the launch and that very house is hit. [...] We were only a little distance from the square.”

All volunteers from the right bank of Kherson Oblast interviewed by Truth Hounds corroborated regular shelling of the flooded territories since the first days after the HPP was destroyed. Emergency response operations, which were already occurring under extremely difficult, urgent and uncertain conditions and without much-needed vessels to transport people, found themselves caught in the crossfire. Neither uniforms nor marked vehicles with clear identification could ensure the safety of emergency responders. On the contrary, according to some volunteers’ testimony, using insignia seemed to make them particularly vulnerable to attacks.⁴⁵

Aware of the higher probability of shelling in certain areas, emergency responders deliberately planned evacuation routes to minimize risks.⁴⁶ Emergency services and the URCS prohibited volunteers from going out into the water when the threat level was high.⁴⁷ However, due to the high unpredictability of conditions and the possible intentional nature of some attacks on emergency responders, volunteers still often found themselves under fire, despite these precautions.

It is difficult to calculate the exact number of volunteers who were injured as a result of shelling on the right bank of Kherson Oblast in the first two weeks after the destruction of the HPP. This is primarily because the media use inconsistent definitions of “volunteers,” and local authorities provide contradictory information. Drawing on open-source monitoring data, Truth Hounds identified at least 10 instances in which volunteers were injured while carrying out evacuations.

According to information from open sources, Ukrainian forces also shelled the left-bank part of Kherson Oblast in the first week after the HPP explosion. Oleshky resident Yevheniia Pikul, as quoted in Les Belei's book *It Was Called a Sea*, reported this and explained the Ukrainian military's actions as a response to increased movement of Russian military equipment shortly after the flooding began.⁴⁸ One witness from Oleshky also told Truth Hounds about the active movement of Russia's equipment:

“

“On June 6 [...], probably at 8 p.m., major movements of Russian armored vehicles began from the river, which surprised us very much. [...] There were unusually high numbers of vehicles leaving, and the tanks were also as if on some kind of rubber pads, because they moved very quickly on the asphalt.”⁴⁹

On June 12, 2023, when the water began to recede, the official Telegram channel of the Nova Kakhovka occupying administration, @VGA_NovayaKahovka, claimed that the Armed Forces of Ukraine had shelled “civilians in the village of Korsunka [...] precisely at the moment when reduced-mobility people were being evacuated.”⁵⁰ On the same day, Deputy Head of Russian Presidential Administration Sergey Kiriyenko reported “constant shelling” by the Ukrainian military in the flooded area, particularly at evacuation points.⁵¹ None of these statements contained any digital proof of attacks or data on their specific locations and times. In the absence of physical access to the occupied territories and witnesses, further verification of the accuracy of these statements remains impossible.

Red Cross volunteers are helping an elderly woman evacuated from a flooded area in Kherson. 6 June, 2023.

Photo by Maxym Marusenko /Getty Images



CHAPTER 4

HOW DID VOLUNTEERS
CONDUCT EVACUATIONS
IN THE OCCUPIED
TERRITORIES OF
KHERSON OBLAST?

On the occupied left bank, the emergency response unfolded under conditions of limited access, unreliable public information, and Russian control over movement. Occupation authorities claimed they had successfully organized evacuations, but witness accounts describe a more fragmented and dangerous reality. Local residents improvised rescues with private boats and makeshift equipment via personal networks on Telegram channels. Russian forces and occupation officials allegedly failed to provide adequate assistance, restricted movement, confiscated equipment, and obstructed some rescue efforts.

In the first days after the explosion, the Russian occupying authorities repeatedly claimed that evacuations from the flooded areas of Kherson Oblast were proceeding successfully. On June 20, 2023, Volodymyr Saldo reported on his Telegram channel that “8.1 thousand people have been evacuated from [...] the Novokakhovskiy city, Oleshkivskiy and Holoprystanskyi municipal districts of Kherson Oblast since the beginning of the rescue operation.”⁵² More than a year later, on September 28, 2024, the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations (MES) awarded departmental medals to seven participants in the United Russia political party’s humanitarian mission for “significant contributions [...] to the elimination of the consequences [...] of the terrorist attack by Ukrainian nationalists at the Kakhovka HPP.” In addition, the MES also rewarded three members of the occupation Kherson Regional Duma, Enver Abduraimov, Vladimir Kosov, and Tamerlan Tsalikov, “for delivering aid [...] directly to the area of emergency”.⁵³

Information obtained by Truth Hounds casts doubt on whether the evacuation in the occupied territories was as effective as claimed. It indicates not only a lack of centralized emergency response effort in the first days following the incident, but also Russian authorities’ active obstruction of spontaneous volunteer rescue efforts.

Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, independent Ukrainian, foreign, and international human rights organizations have had no access to the Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine.⁵⁴ Because of this, it is extremely difficult to form a complete and accurate understanding of the events on the left bank of the Dnipro River after the destruction of the Kakhovka HPP. Given the

limited information and the difficulty of verifying it, this chapter rests primarily on testimonies given to Truth Hounds by three volunteers from Oleshky and Hola Prystan who returned to Ukrainian-controlled territories at different times after the HPP was destroyed. It also draws on verified information from open sources, including reports from the UN and other international organizations.⁵⁵

Eyewitnesses to the events from the left bank of Kherson Oblast, interviewed by Truth Hounds and other organizations, claim that the occupying administrations and Russian troops did not evacuate the civilian population from localities that were in the flood zone.⁵⁶



“I rescued people because there was an understanding that if you didn’t save them, no one else would. [...]. There was a time when I was sailing by, and there were about five people, guys and girls, asking for help. And I would say, like, ‘Sorry, you are not flooded yet, you have a stone house. Over there, people are screaming from their clay houses.’ I tried to rescue people with clay houses because water quickly damaged them, and there were mostly elderly people there,” shared a volunteer from Oleshky.⁵⁷

The locals, left to their own devices, were forced to independently organize emergency operations, coordinated in specially created Telegram channels.⁵⁸

In several occupied towns, particularly Oleshky and Hola Prystan, local occupation administration officials appear to have left their offices temporarily and relocated to safer locations in the occupied territories or in Russia.⁵⁹ The Russian military, part of which remained on the ground, appears to have obstructed volunteer efforts, confiscating boats with more powerful engines for their own use and preventing outside volunteers from entering flooded localities.⁶⁰ An interviewee from Oleshky, citing his acquaintances, said that when Russian volunteers arrived in the city from Crimea by boat, the local authorities, who had already returned to the city by that time, did not allow them to conduct rescue operations, al-

legedly due to the unfavorable security situation.⁶¹ Vladyslav Bilonozhko, the Head of the Emergency and Rescue Department of the SES Directorate of Ukraine in Kherson Oblast, describes the same pattern in Les Belei's book *It Was Called a Sea*.⁶² Meanwhile, a witness from Hola Prystan stated that Russian troops did carry out evacuations in isolated instances, but only for people with Russian passports:

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“Russian soldiers [...] sailed up and took people away, but they asked, 'Do you have a Russian passport?' If they heard no, they said, 'Then stay here.' This was shared by people who were rescued later.”⁶³

A witness from Oleshky also noted that, according to survivors who sat on the roofs of flooded buildings, on the third day after the HPP's destruction, Russian soldiers “started helping certain categories of people for money or if they had a Russian passport.”⁶⁴ In addition, representatives of the occupying authorities published announcements about evacuation by bus on Telegram channels, but many residents of the flooded territories could not physically reach the indicated locations.⁶⁵

From October 2022 onwards, Russian official and unofficial sources, including Volodymyr Saldo and Sergey Surovikin, then-commander of the Joint Group of Russian Forces in Ukraine, repeatedly claimed that Kyiv was allegedly preparing a mass missile strike on the Kakhovka HPP dam and warned of the potentially disastrous consequences of such an attack.⁶⁶ On the one hand, this may indicate active formation of an “information alibi” by the Russian side to absolve themselves from the future crime.⁶⁷ On the other hand, this confirms that the occupying authorities were aware of the possible scale and consequences of such an incident and of the need to develop a mechanism of rapid crisis response in advance to protect the lives of civilians, regardless of the reasons for the destruction of the HPP.

Immediately after destroying the HPP, the Russian side deliberately downplayed the scale and disastrous consequences of the tragedy in its public communications. On June 6, Volodymyr Saldo

stated on air on the Russia 24 channel that “no requests for evacuation” came in from localities in the flooded area.⁶⁸ On the same day, he published a Telegram post in which he claimed that the majority of the adult population refused to evacuate, citing their desire to “wait for the water to recede and keep working on their land.”⁶⁹ At the same time, the post mentioned the “almost mandatory” evacuation of children to Crimea or to other locations within the occupied part of Kherson Oblast. On June 7, contrary to Saldo's statements, Russian emergency services told the Russian news agency TASS that they had evacuated about 1,300 people from the occupied territories, out of more than 40,000 who were at risk.⁷⁰ According to TASS, as of June 6, three Russian MES rapid response rescue teams had been deployed to Nova Kakhovka, Hola Prystan, and Oleshky.

According to a witness from Oleshky, Russian forces also restricted freedom of movement to prevent information about the situation from leaking:

“

“As soon as the flooding started, [...] it was still possible to leave [...]. There were two evacuation points: one towards Kopany, to Crimea [...] and the other along the highway to Skadovsk, towards the Black Sea. On day two [7 June—ed.] [Russian soldiers] blocked entry to and exit from the city to prevent the disclosure of information about the situation.”⁷¹

Oleshky resident Yevheniia Pikul, as quoted in Les Belei's book, reported that the information blackout extended to some Russian military personnel, suggesting that the occupation leadership sought to conceal the scale and impact of the tragedy even from its own forces.

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“Passing one Russian checkpoint after another, we saw the frightened, surprised eyes of the occupiers. Each of them asked how much water

⁶¹ According to the testimonies collected by the Kyiv Independent, Russian troops confiscated civilian boats for military needs even several months before the HPP was destroyed, which led to a shortage after the flooding started.

there was, how far it was, whether its level was rising, and where it might be safe. [...] The enemy command did not even tell its own people about this terrible catastrophe, abandoning everyone who was at checkpoints at the time.⁷²

Mobile communications in the flooded areas also often failed.⁷³ This not only made it difficult to share truthful information about the flooding's consequences but also complicated interactions between survivors and their loved ones, as well as with anyone who could offer rescue.

To fill the vacuum that the inaction of the occupation authorities created, locals began to conduct rescue operations by themselves, on boats that the Russian military had not yet confiscated.⁷⁴ Spontaneous coordination occurred mostly through Telegram channels, where survivors and their loved ones could share requests for help, including addresses or coordinates. Volunteers also evacuated animals and delivered water and food to survivors.⁷⁵



"On June 7, my wife and I went to Pershohe Travnia Street [...], where my wife's brother lived. When he left, the water was already up to his waist, but he still had dogs and cats at home. We had a boat. I got it, and pumped out the water. We tried to get there, but the current was very strong. In the end, we succeeded, but in places it was so turbulent that we couldn't pull the boat out. We could not attach the engine because the Russians would take it away or shoot at us. There were cases when engines were taken away, and some cases when people weren't allowed to go to the town center to rescue others," shared a resident of Hola Prystan.⁷⁶

Yaroslav Vasyliiev, who coordinated evacuations in Oleshky remotely through the @OLESHKYevakuation Telegram channel, told the Kyiv Independent that on the third day after the explosion, he received a call from a woman who identified herself as a volunteer speaking on behalf of the occupying authorities. She proposed joining forces and handing over volunteer boats to Russian

emergency services. Yaroslav refused but provided the coordinates of some survivors. On the same day, Yaroslav's colleagues were working in the village at locations whose coordinates he had shared with the woman on the call, but saw no representatives of the Russian emergency services.⁷⁷

The lack of organized rescue routes particularly affected people with reduced mobility and people with disabilities who were largely unable to reach the upper floors of buildings or to access higher ground independently.



"A friend [...] asked to check on a person with a disability who could not walk. My stepfather and I went there. The two-story house was completely submerged all the way up to the roof. I said it was unlikely that the person survived. Then I saw people sitting on the roof of the house next door, started asking them questions, [...] but they did not say anything specific. They just got to the roof by themselves and that was it. As we swam, we saw an old man who was barely holding on to a fence. We could not pick him up because we were on an [inflatable] mattress ourselves, so we helped him climb the fence and from there get to the second floor of his house. We saw all kinds of things, but there was no help from the Russians. The only help came from the locals," shared an Oleshky resident.⁷⁸

For many residents of the occupied part of Kherซอน Oblast, the flooding of the left bank became a unique opportunity to flee to territories under Ukrainian control. Taking advantage of the temporary absence of the occupation authorities and the reduced number of Russian military personnel, locals sailed to the opposite bank of the Dnipro, risking their lives, particularly given the threat of shelling from both sides.⁷⁹ In some cases, Ukrainian military personnel, emergency responders, and volunteers assisted the escapees. By June 11, 2023, they had allegedly rescued 112 people from the left bank.⁸⁰ However, these efforts occasionally led to losses among those involved, as evacuation efforts were hampered both by Russian shelling and the force of the floodwater.⁸¹

This further highlights the dangerous conditions under which the emergency operations took place.



“When I got to Kherson, [...] they would tell us endlessly that we had a good guardian angel who helped us cross the river because six people were killed. The next day [10 June 2023] two more civilians were killed trying to sail out of Oleshky. This is what the Defense Forces told us,” shared a volunteer from Oleshky, who evacuated to Kherson in coordination with the AFU and the SES. He also noted that while on the water, his motorboat was “pursued by Russian drones,” which forced him to sail nonstop.⁸²

Truth Hounds interviewed another witness from Oleshky, who evacuated to Kherson with his stepfather and grandmother in a two-seat inflatable boat with one oar. Closer to the right bank, the personnel of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) brought them to safety:



“One with an oar, another one with a stick; the grandma was given a white flag. We sailed through part of the city, the Kulandra district. All the houses there were flooded up to the roofs. The water level was so high that, while in the boat, I could raise my hands and reach the power lines. We paddled, clung to wires and treetops. I looked at the map and saw that it took us six hours to cover eight kilometers. [...] We saw Russian boats hidden in the bushes. We thought they were going to start shooting. Grandma raised the white flag. We kept sailing on and on... Then we looked and we saw something like roofs. We climbed on top and I contacted the military. About 40 minutes later, the AFU came to save us.”⁸⁴

One volunteer from Kherson took his parents, brother, two neighbors, and animals out of the occupied village of Kardashynka on his own boat. However, later, the Russian military began to monitor the route more closely, which made further evacuations impossible.



“It was day three. The water began to recede. There was no contact with my parents. Phones were jammed. When I got to my parents, my mom was in bad shape. They were already under the roof, in the attic. [...] We broke out the side dormer window and pulled them out through it. We moved Mom on a sheet. [...] Then we were returning down the street, and our neighbor was in the attic. The old lady also broke her window and was able to climb out. We got her, too. Then we also took one neighbor from the roof, as well as his two dogs and one cat. [...]”⁸³

As of May 2026, it remains extremely difficult to confidently assess the extent of flooding-related damage on the occupied left bank of Kherson Oblast. According to eyewitnesses, the Russian side did not make sufficient efforts to help the survivors, deliberately obstructed emergency response efforts, and concealed or downplayed the scale and devastating impact of the flooding on the local population. Under these circumstances, self-organized volunteers in the occupied territories, in the territories controlled by Ukraine, and abroad became one of the main sources of hope and salvation for the survivors on the left bank. Despite a critical shortage of boats, security risks, and the occupying authorities’ lack of assistance or even deliberate obstruction, these volunteers demonstrated exceptional self-organization and resilience, significantly mitigating the impact of the flood on the civilian population and likely saving many lives.

CHAPTER 5

THE WEAPONIZATION OF WATER AND THE OBSTRUCTION OF EMERGENCY RESPONSE

The preceding chapters establish three findings. First, volunteers became indispensable to the Kakhovka emergency response due to the scale of the flooding. Second, Russian shelling on the right bank repeatedly disrupted rescue operations. Third, on the occupied left bank, Russian forces and occupation authorities failed to organize adequate rescue and obstructed volunteer efforts. This chapter explains what those findings reveal about the nature of the harm produced by the Kakhovka disaster.

The destruction of the Kakhovka Dam could constitute an act of water weaponization: a case in which water itself becomes the instrument of harm. Scholars have analyzed the weaponization of water in both strategic and tactical terms. Dr. Markus DuBois King, a professor of environment and international affairs, writing on conflicts in Syria and Iraq, distinguishes between long-term coercion through control over water resources and the more immediate use of flooding, contamination, or deprivation to achieve military objectives.⁸⁵ The Pacific Institute's Water Conflict Chronology classifies water-related violence in armed conflicts as involving water as a trigger, a weapon, or a casualty of conflict.⁸⁶

The Kakhovka case illustrates both dimensions mentioned above. The destruction of the dam inflicted immediate tactical harm by flooding front-line areas and civilian settlements along the lower Dnipro. At the same time, it operated strategically, destroying a reservoir on which long-term water supply, irrigation, and ecosystems depended. It also made water systems and ecosystems casualties of war, including drinking water supplies, agricultural water, the reservoir itself, and the Dnipro Delta.

These frameworks help explain the destruction of the dam itself, but they do not fully capture the response-phase harm documented in this report. Kakhovka shows how the weaponization of water can be compounded when a party to the conflict attacks or obstructs the rescue efforts needed to mitigate its consequences.

The response window explains this compounding effect. It marks the interval between the initial act of destruction and the point at which many consequences become irreversible. An attack

such as the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam does not produce all of its harm at the moment of detonation. Harm builds over time. Civilians remain trapped, communications break down, evacuation routes close, and medical needs grow more urgent. During that interval, responders can save lives and reduce long-term harm through coordinated rescue, evacuation, medical care, and humanitarian assistance. When parties to a conflict attack responders, block their movement, or deprive them of the equipment they need, they undermine the ability of responders to use that window effectively and increase civilian harm.

In the Kakhovka case, Russian forces and occupation authorities shaped how effectively anyone could use that window. The harm was compounded by what Russian forces did, and by what occupation authorities failed or refused to do, during the response phase. On the right bank, sustained shelling of evacuation points and rescue boats prevented effective use of the window by making rescue dangerous and intermittent. On the occupied left bank, the absence of organized assistance, combined with the confiscation of civilian boats and obstruction of self-organized volunteers, achieved the same result from the other direction by removing the means through which rescue could take place.

Analyzed together, these two patterns show that Russian conduct on both banks of the Dnipro simultaneously undermined the effective use of the response window in different ways. On the right bank, rescue capacity existed, but Russian forces attacked it. On the left bank, Russian forces obstructed rescue capacity before it could be deployed. As a result, civilians remained trapped longer, received less help, and likely faced greater risk of avoidable death, injury, and prolonged exposure to flood conditions.

The Kakhovka case shows that timing matters. The destruction of the dam created the immediate emergency, but the scale of civilian harm depended in part on what happened in the hours and days that followed. The calibration to timing also appears in the practice of double-tap strikes documented in Truth Hounds' "[*Calculated Harm*](#)" report.⁸⁷ In both cases, conduct during the response window extends the harm of the initial attack and produces harm of its own.

CHAPTER 6

LEGAL ANALYSIS OF PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS AND EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Available evidence points to a pattern of conduct by Russian forces and occupation authorities that resulted in increased harm to civilians on both banks of the Dnipro River, whether as a result of gross negligence or deliberate policy. In any event, that distinction does not change a core legal concern that they obstructed emergency response and carried out sustained attacks in ways that appear inconsistent with their obligations under IHL to protect civilians and facilitate humanitarian access.

This chapter applies IHL to the emergency response after the destruction of the Kakhovka HPP. It focuses on four linked questions: how IHL protects civilians during hostilities; how it protects emergency responders, humanitarian personnel, and civil defense work; how it regulates humanitarian access and relief; and how occupation law applies to civilians in Russian-controlled areas.

Protection of civilians and rescue work

IHL requires parties to distinguish at all times between civilians and combatants, and between civilian objects and military objectives. Parties may direct attacks only against combatants and military objectives. Civilians, evacuees, volunteers, humanitarian workers, medical personnel, and emergency responders remain protected as civilians unless and for such time as they directly participate in hostilities. Some responders may also receive additional protection where they qualify as medical personnel, humanitarian relief personnel, or civil defense personnel under IHL.⁸⁸

IHL also requires parties to take constant care during military operations to spare civilians and civilian objects. This duty requires feasible precautions in the choice of targets, timing, means, and methods of attack. In the context of a flood emergency, these rules require attacking forces to account for evacuation points, rescue routes, boats, marked vehicles, temporary shelters, and other civilian emergency activity before they launch or continue attacks.⁸⁹

Humanitarian relief personnel and objects used for relief operations receive additional protection.

Parties must respect and protect humanitarian relief personnel, and they must respect and protect objects used for humanitarian relief operations. These protections cover personnel and material that deliver food, water, medical care, evacuation support, and other essential assistance to civilians in need.⁹⁰

Civil defense rules also matter. Additional Protocol I treats civil defense as humanitarian work that protects the civilian population against the dangers of hostilities or disasters and helps civilians recover from their immediate effects. It includes warnings, evacuations, rescues, medical services, firefighting, emergency accommodation, emergency supplies, and measures to restore essential services. Parties must respect and protect civilian civil defense organizations and their personnel, including in occupied territory, subject to the limited conditions set out in IHL.⁹¹

Humanitarian access and duties in occupied territory

IHL also regulates relief for civilians who lack essential supplies. In occupied territory, the occupying power must ensure, to the fullest extent of the means available to it, food and medical supplies for the population and must maintain medical services and public health. If the population, or part of it, lacks adequate supplies, the occupying power must agree to relief schemes and facilitate them. These obligations apply to civilians under occupation regardless of their political views, passport status, or perceived allegiance.⁹²

These rules give special legal weight to the left-bank findings. Where Russian forces and occupation authorities controlled territory, they had duties not only to refrain from harming civilians but also to organize, permit, and facilitate life-saving assistance. They could not lawfully rely on generalized security concerns, administrative control, or occupation policies to arbitrarily or unlawfully block evacuation, confiscate essential rescue capacity, or deny assistance to civilians who needed urgent help.⁹³

Assessment of the Kakhovka response

On the Ukrainian-controlled right bank, the documented shelling of flooded localities, evacuation areas, and rescue activity raises serious IHL concerns. If Russian forces intentionally directed attacks against civilians, emergency responders, humanitarian personnel, evacuation points, or rescue vehicles, they violated the rule of distinction. Even without proof of a specific intent to target responders, repeated shelling in areas where rescue operations visibly took place may show a failure to take constant care to spare civilians and civilian objects, or a failure to take feasible precautions during attack.⁹⁴

The same analysis applies to attacks that forced responders to delay evacuations, reroute boats, suspend operations, or leave trapped civilians waiting for help. IHL does not treat the disruption of rescue as a legally neutral consequence of combat. When attacks foreseeably prevent civilians from receiving life-saving assistance, investigators should examine whether the attacking force distinguished between military and civilian activity, took feasible precautions, and respected protected humanitarian and civil defense functions.⁹⁵

On the occupied left bank, the legal concerns differ but may carry equal gravity. The factual record describes inadequate official evacuation, confiscation of boats and engines, restrictions on movement, obstruction of local volunteers, limits on access to flooded areas, and alleged discrimination in access to rescue. In an occupied area, such conduct implicates Russia's duties to protect civilians, maintain essential services, facilitate relief, and permit civil defense tasks. If Russian authorities blocked or diverted local rescue capacity while civilians remained trapped by floodwaters, their conduct appears inconsistent with those duties.⁹⁶

The available evidence does not require a final choice between two characterizations: gross negligence by Russian authorities or a deliberate policy to maximize harm to Ukrainian civilians. Either characterization prompts serious legal concern. The first would indicate a serious failure to com-

ply with positive duties toward civilians under occupation and, where shelling or other military operations were involved, with the obligation to take constant care and feasible precautions.⁹⁷ The second would indicate intentional exploitation of disaster-related vulnerability and could support findings of deliberate obstruction of relief, discriminatory denial of assistance, unlawful attacks, or other serious violations, depending on the evidence.⁹⁸ Both require further investigation, including into command decisions, orders, restrictions on movement, confiscation of boats, patterns of shelling near rescue activity, and the treatment of civilians seeking evacuation.

The destruction of the Kakhovka HPP created an emergency. IHL required all parties, and especially the occupying power in areas under its control, to protect civilians and allow life-saving assistance to reach them. The evidence described indicates that Russian forces and occupation authorities attacked, endangered, or obstructed emergency response in ways that raise serious concerns under IHL. Accountability efforts should therefore examine not only the destruction of the dam, but also the conduct that shaped who received rescue, who remained trapped, and who faced avoidable harm after the flood began.

CONCLUSION

The nature and scale of the Kakhovka HPP disaster made volunteer emergency efforts not merely important but indispensable for minimizing harm to the civilian population and the environment. The disaster also produced a distinct second layer of harm: harm generated by the conditions under which civilians could or could not receive life-saving help.

On the Ukrainian-controlled right bank, independent volunteers and NGO staff served as critical reinforcements for government emergency services in the first days after the dam's destruction. They collected evacuation requests, coordinated emergency operations, delivered food, provided temporary housing, and set out directly onto the water in boats, rescuing people and animals, often under the threat of Russian shelling. Russian forces attacked these operations with mortar and artillery fire, targeted known evacuation points, and continued shelling even as clearly identified personnel conducted rescues. This pattern of conduct is inconsistent with the protections IHL affords to humanitarian operations and to civilians receiving assistance.

On the occupied left bank, volunteers, mostly untrained locals affected by the flooding themselves, had to replace state emergency services because occupation authorities failed to provide assistance. They formed a parallel, loosely organized emergency response system, coordinating their efforts through Telegram channels and direct communication with neighbors, family, and friends. While conducting emergency operations, they were exposed to danger not only due to the difficult conditions caused by the flood, but also due to threats from the Russian military, which

confiscated civilian motorboats for military use, blocked access to flooded areas, and, in documented cases, reportedly conditioned rescue on possession of Russian passports or payment.

This pattern of conduct on both banks, attacking responders on the right and obstructing them on the left, compounded the harm caused by the weaponization of water with further harm produced in the response phase, and exceeds what can be explained by response challenges typical of the initial stages of large-scale disasters. Whether this pattern reflects a deliberate policy by Russian forces to maximize harm to Ukrainian civilians, a gross and systematic failure by occupation authorities to discharge their obligations under IHL, or a combination of both, the documented record is sufficient to warrant further legal investigation and accountability efforts.

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Volunteers evacuate civilians from the flooded areas of Kherson by a motorboat. The signboard in the background says «Lost World». 7 June, 2023.

Photo by Alex Babenko/Getty Images

This report examines how Russian forces and occupation authorities disrupted, obstructed, and endangered volunteer emergency response efforts after the destruction of the Kakhovka dam in Ukraine, an event that triggered the largest environmental disaster since the start of the full-scale invasion. It focuses on the activities of volunteers who assisted state emergency services and saved lives in the first days after the disaster. Drawing on interviews with volunteers, it examines events on both Ukrainian-controlled and occupied territories and presents evidence that, in both contexts, Russian military forces and occupation authorities used the consequences of the disaster and military force in ways that were inconsistent with the norms and principles of international humanitarian law.