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An older white man with glasses wears a round white hat with a cross and a train and a blue a

Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk of Kyiv-Halych, head of the Ukrainian Catholic Church, is pictured in a March 25, 2022, photo. Archbishop Shevchuk and Archbishop Visvaldas Kulbokas, the Vatican's nuncio in Kyiv, participated in an online panel Feb. 8, 2023. The seminar was organized by the Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need, as President Volodymyr Zelenskyy requested fighter jets and missiles during visits to London and Paris. (OSV News photo/Ukrainian Catholic Church)



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The head of the Ukrainian Catholic Church has defended President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's requests for long-range weapons, although a Vatican diplomat warned that arm supply is a complex topic.

"I cannot morally endorse this request for arms because I don't know all the details -- but we cannot defend ourselves without arms," said Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk of Kyiv-Halych. "It may sound strange that religious leaders favor the military support Ukraine is looking for, but to survive, we have to defend ourselves. If someone knows how we can stop Russian troops without arms, let them please tell us the secret."

The church leader made the comments at a Feb. 8 online seminar organized by the Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need, as Zelenskyy requested fighter jets and missiles during visits to London and Paris, before traveling on to Brussels for Feb. 9 talks with European Union officials.

Shevchuk said he was "very concerned" by news of escalating Russian frontline attacks, as bombing became an "everyday reality" in many regions of Ukraine, and he reiterated his gratitude for Western support.

However, Archbishop Visvaldas Kulbokas, the Vatican's nuncio in Kyiv, told the seminar that "when we raise such questions about weapons and arms, the country which first introduced their military to Ukraine would have this question addressed to them first," suggesting talks with Russia are a necessary step as they started the war.

"When addressing Ukraine's legitimate right to self-defense, the Holy Father and our Secretariat of State have always stressed the proportional use of weapons -- you must think how to use them, wisely and attentively addressing all aspects," said Kulbokas.

Kulbokas also stressed that while many countries "have armed police, I have never heard Churches being asked if it's right for the police to use weapons in order to defend the civilian people," suggesting that "with mere hands they are unable to protect justice and peace."

The nuncio added that he believed the war was being "spoken about superficially" in some European countries.

"I have the impression many countries are still speaking about this war in a superficial way -- not only Russia, which is a different story, but also those close to Ukraine. I feel a lot of superficiality here -- a lack of empathy, closeness, charity and prayer," he said.

The exchange took place as fierce fighting continued in eastern Ukraine, and as NATO member-states pledged to begin sending battle tanks in anticipation of a new Russian offensive in the yearlong war, which has left tens of thousands of soldiers and civilians dead.

Shevchuk said humanitarian conditions were deteriorating, with 15 million Ukrainians forced from their homes and half the electricity network destroyed, adding that the Black Sea city of Odessa had spent four days in total blackout at the start of February.

The archbishop said he was grateful to God and Western supporters of Ukraine that no one had so far "died of hunger or cold."

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However, he added that up to 80% of the population now needed "trauma rehabilitation" and said the Ukrainian Catholic Church's counseling centers, set up in cooperation with health officials, now also needed help from abroad.

"The Ukrainian army has liberated half of all occupied areas -- but Russia is methodically destroying the critical infrastructure, and many people are returning to their homes to find there's no electricity or heating," Shevchuk told the seminar.

"In the Soviet Union, psychology formed part of the state's repressive system, so many Ukrainians are still afraid to seek counseling. This is why we are training our priests in psychological first aid, so they can then send people on to clinical specialists," he added.

Kulbokas said he was also aware millions of Ukrainians were now "wounded and needing help," adding that religious organizations had provided most of the 800,000 electricity generators imported to the country in 2022 and played a vital role in local supplies.

He said he had met surviving POWs from the Azov Battalion, many of whom had lost limbs defending the port of Mariupol. He added that they and many other Russian-speaking citizens now preferred to speak in Ukrainian in order to "identify as Ukrainians."

"When people like this spoke Russian, they were told Russia needed to come and free them -- given how this was manipulated, many now try to avoid Russian and insist they don't want to be liberated," the Lithuanian nuncio told the seminar.

"In the occupied regions, it's shocking to see that street names have been changed from Ukrainian to Russian. It shows how this has also become a cultural, historical and ideological war."

In an early February report, Ukraine's Institute for Religious Freedom said 494 churches and religious buildings had so far been destroyed during the war, including 143 belonging to Ukraine's Moscow-linked Orthodox church, the UOC, which is expected to be outlawed under government-backed legislation.

The German-based Aid to the Church in Need, founded as a pastoral aid organization in 1947, is currently supporting 292 projects, worth $10.24 million, across Ukraine, including the supply of vehicles and heating and cooking equipment.

Kulbokas said large areas of Ukraine's eastern Donetsk, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia regions remained without Catholic pastoral care after the arrest or expulsion of their priests, adding that overnight shelling and missile attacks still made it difficult to sleep in Kyiv.

"I really have no idea when this war will end -- though it's shocking to hear this, not all the world is united against it, so we still have a lot of work to do, even if we believe in miracles," the nuncio said.

"My main preoccupation is with those living close to the front line, or under constant shelling in Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, Kherson or Bakhmut, where the priests themselves are becoming depressed and tired after so many months seeking shelter from bombardment."