News

Water flows over banks and between two broken parts of a concrete dam

The breached Nova Kakhovka dam is pictured in a screenshot from video in Kherson region, Ukraine June 6, 2023. (OSV News screenshot/Reuters)

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The destruction of a dam and hydroelectric power plant in a Russian-occupied area of Ukraine marks a "dastardly and diabolical act" that "defies imagination," Archbishop Borys Gudziak, metropolitan of Ukrainian Catholics in the U.S., told OSV News.

On June 6, damage to the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant, located in Ukraine's Kherson region, released some 18 cubic kilometers of water from the Kakhovka Reservoir, one of the world's largest capacity reservoirs. At least 29 towns and villages along the Dnipro River have been flooded so far, with 42,000 persons at flood risk, according to Ukrainian government officials.

Over 80 settlements are in the path of the surging waters, which have swept away entire houses and structures, killing hundreds of animals -- including all but a few of the 300 in residence at the Kazkova Dibrova zoo.

Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said hundreds of thousands have been left without drinking water, while Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council has estimated at least 150 tons of machine oil have entered the Dnipro River, with more than 300 tons still at risk for leakage.

While international media reports have steered clear of identifying a definitive cause or responsible party for the destruction, the nonprofit Institute for the Study of War, based in Washington, reported June 6 that absent a "definitive assessment of responsibility … the balance of evidence, reasoning, and rhetoric suggests that the Russians deliberately damaged the dam," which Russian forces overtook in February 2022.

The destruction of the dam precedes a highly anticipated counteroffensive by Ukraine in the war, which Russia launched in February 2022. The full-scale invasion continues attacks initiated in 2014 with the illegal annexation of Ukraine's Crimea and the fostering of pro-Russian separatist activities in Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk provinces.

Investigators have documented approximately 80,000 war crimes committed by Russia since February 2022. In March, the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for Russian President Vladimir Putin and his commissioner for children's rights, Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova, for the unlawful deportation and transfer of close to 19,400 children from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation. Ukraine has also filed charges of genocide by Russia with the International Court of Justice.

"We've seen an array of war crimes. This act of terrorism supplements it," said Gudziak.

"Let the record show that we can add ecosystems to the list of Putin's victims, and ecoterrorism to his resume," said Nicholas Rudnytzky, professor of history and dean of academic services at Manor College in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania, a school with deep roots in the Ukrainian-American community.

"Ukraine has been struck with an act of mass terror," said Eugene Luciw, president of the Ukrainian Congress Committee of America’s Philadelphia chapter and a member of Presentation of Our Lord Ukrainian Catholic Church in Lansdale, Pennsylvania. "This shows absolute proof that Russia has to be labeled as a state sponsor of terrorism."

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Rudnytzky told OSV News that "Putin’s position is … that since Ukrainians do not exist in any real sense of the word, then what harm can be claimed if the earth is scorched, the children abducted, the fields are mined and whole settlements are wiped out by unleashing catastrophic flood waters?"

With "billions of dollars of infrastructure destroyed, it will take decades to recover," said Gudziak.

The flooding compounds the severe environmental damage already sustained by Ukraine due to munitions contamination from the Russian invasion -- and threatens Ukraine's longtime agricultural importance as "the breadbasket of Europe," along with the Middle East and North Africa, he said.

Rudnytzky said the dam destruction enables Russia -- which also occupies Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, the largest in Europe -- to "(cast) uncertainty and fear about the stability of nuclear power in general."

"Putin has let Finland, Sweden, the Czech Republic, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and anyone else that has a nuclear power plant know that (finding) alternatives to Russia oil and gas can be a liability," said Rudnytzky. "With the breaking of Kakhovka Dam and … endangering the stability of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear facility, Putin sends a clear signal of how far he is willing to go to enable Russian regional dominance in both political and economic spheres."

Luciw said that prospect leaves "absolutely no choice for the Western world other than to support a Ukrainian decisive victory," adding that he plans to continue lobbying Congress to "declare Russia to be a state sponsor of terrorism."

At the same time, he is petitioning heaven.

"Prayer is an absolute essential to accomplishing any goal that involves freeing Ukraine from this terror," he said. "Without it, none of the goals, military or otherwise, which are important in this conflict, will ever be accomplished."

He said he also "prays for the conversion of the enemy. … I just sit down and say, 'Lord, help these people find a true light and give them an opportunity to change

themselves.'"

"Our prayers and solidarity for a just peace are ever more important," said Gudziak. "We should have no doubt that God's truth will prevail."

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