News



An emergency service worker carries a child as local residents flee on an evacuation train from Russian troop advances in Pokrovsk, Ukraine, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine, Aug. 22, 2024. (OSV News/Reuters/Thomas Peter)

Gina Christian

View Author Profile

OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Washington, D.C. — June 13, 2025
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Calls from bipartisan lawmakers and faith leaders across denominations are growing for the return of thousands of Ukrainian children deported to Russia, as the Trump administration withholds approved funding from a key research effort by Yale University to track the kids.

That research has informed Vatican-mediated efforts to return the children, whose transfers constitute "the largest kidnapping that has happened in 80 years, since World War II," said Nathaniel Raymond, director of the Humanitarian Research Lab at the Yale School of Public Health, which has extensively documented the systematic transfers thanks to funding from the U.S. State Department.

"We ask the global community to get behind the effort to free the abducted children of Ukraine," Metropolitan Archbishop Borys Gudziak of the Ukrainian Catholic Archeparchy of Philadelphia told OSV News.

Throughout the 11 years of the war, which accelerated in 2022 with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia has systematically deported at least 19,546 Ukrainian children, subjecting them to "patriotic re-education" designed to erase their Ukrainian identity, as well as to abuse and forced adoption by Russian families. Some have been drafted into the Russian army upon reaching the age of 18.

The actual number of deported children is feared to be far higher, with Russian child commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova — who along with Russian President Vladimir Putin is the subject of an International Criminal Court arrest warrant for the forced transfers — admitting that some 700,000 Ukrainian children were in Russian custody.

Ukrainian child advocate and former government official Mykola Kuleba recently told OSV News that some 1.6 million Ukrainian children are "under serious and imminent threat due to Russia seizing territories" that account for "20% of Ukraine's population of children."

With parents detained, injured or killed, those children are defenseless and subject to abduction by Russia, said Kuleba.

The systematic deportation, coordinated by multiple actors, violates several instruments of international law, including the Fourth Geneva Convention, the Genocide Convention and the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Raymond and his team have painstakingly traced thousands of the missing Ukrainian children, using satellite imagery, open source intelligence and other resources in what he told OSV News was an "extremely" labor-intensive undertaking.

"This is not just Googling stuff on the internet," Raymond told OSV News.

Through the lab, Raymond and his team have partnered with the State Department's Conflict Observatory to conduct independent research on Russia's atrocities in Ukraine, including the child deportations. The lab's rigorous verification enables the research to be used in legal proceedings.

In October 2023, Raymond traveled to Rome in response to a request from the Vatican, which he said "has been a critical player" in negotiations for the children's return.

Pope Francis appointed Cardinal Matteo Zuppi, archbishop of Bologna and president of the Italian bishops' conference, as papal envoy to Russia and Ukraine, with the cardinal traveling to both nations in 2023 to address the issue and other humanitarian concerns amid the war. In April, Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, in Rome for Francis' funeral, met with Zuppi, thanking him for the Vatican's assistance and stressing the ongoing need for further support.

Advertisement

During his Vatican visit, Raymond provided "detailed briefings on the scope of the program."

He told OSV News that the Vatican has "a unique moral role" enabling it "to be advocates and witnesses for children."

Raymond said that Pope Leo XIV "is really continuing a level of Vatican engagement in the negotiation cell with Qatar and South Africa."

The Yale lab, which had initially lost its funding in February due to Trump administration cuts, transferred research data and evidence to Ukrainian authorities and Europol — the European Union's law enforcement agency — following a brief reinstatement of support in March.

Now, that reprieve has ended, although Congress had previously allocated some $8 million to the State Department's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations. The funds have yet to be disbursed.

The cut comes at a crucial time, said Raymond, since in the wake of the ICC arrest warrants, Russia has begun "concealing information about the children and then really using them as hostages and as leverage for negotiations."

One June 11, two lawmakers, Rep. Lloyd Doggett, D-Texas, and Rep. Greg Landsman, D-Ohio, led bipartisan requests to Secretary of State Marco Rubio to release the funding.

In May, a bipartisan resolution was introduced by several lawmakers calling for the return of the children as a precondition for any peace agreements in the Russia-Ukraine war.

That initiative followed an April letter sent by 40 faith leaders to Trump, urging him and Rubio to facilitate the return of the children.

Among the signatories of that letter — most of whom represent various Christian denominations and outreaches — were Walter Kim, president of the National Association of Evangelicals; Myal Greene, president and CEO of World Relief; Brent Leatherwood, president of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberties Commission; and Father Jason Charron, a Catholic priest of the Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy of St. Josaphat in Parma, Ohio.

Gudziak called the resolution "something that every human being with a heart should understand."

Amid the nation's politically divisive climate, such unity is heartening, said Raymond.

"The entire political story has been one of bipartisan cooperation within both the House and the Senate, by Republicans and Democrats who see this as a non-

negotiable issue," Raymond said. "This has become common ground. The only piece of common ground in the U.S. (regarding) Ukraine is the kids."

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. View the full series.