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DRC Quarterly Protection Monitoring Report

January – March 2026

Methodology

Methodology and Demographics: The analysis is guided by DRC's Analytical Framework, which incorporates the Global Protection Cluster's Protection Analytical Framework (PAF). The PAF provides a structured approach to identifying and understanding protection risks, thereby informing strategic responses, programmatic interventions, and advocacy priorities.

Between 1 January and 31 March 2026, DRC Protection teams surveyed 181 households corresponding to 419 individuals. Most of the surveyed households (HH) were conflict affected non-displaced (56%) households. Of those surveyed, 32% were internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 12% were returnees. All the surveyed individuals were Ukrainian citizens, of whom 60% were females. The average age of surveyed individuals was 50 years old. The average household size surveyed was 2.2 people.

To complement quantitative data collection, key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted in Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, Sumy, Donetsk and Mykolaiv oblasts. A total of 80 KIIs, including 17 male and 63 female participants, were conducted, the KIIs targeted representatives of local authorities, community group representatives and community leaders, collective/transit site staff, social workers, humanitarian aid workers, and veterans. DRC also conducted 93 FGDs reaching 554 participants from the wider community, including 81 female and 473 male participants. Convenience, non-probability sampling was used.

Limitations: Data collected through KIIs and FGDs reflects community perceptions and reported experiences and is not statistically representative. Information is subject to perception bias, and variations in awareness among respondents regarding various thematic topics and protection terminology.

Context

Conflict and/or hazard history

Between January to March 2026, the Russian Armed Forces (RAF) continued to systematically carry out missile and drone strikes on various regions of Ukraine, particularly targeting critical infrastructure. In temperatures often below 10 degrees Celsius, widespread power, water and heating outages were observed. The situation gradually improved from mid-February following restoration and mitigation measures, although regular disruptions, particularly outside major cities remained significant.

While strikes were also documented on railway infrastructure including junctions, depots and tracks, the railway system as a whole continued to function due to rapid repairs and rerouting. It is anticipated that the electricity and railway infrastructure will be less impacted as the spring begins however it is likely that the RAF will increasingly target water infrastructure including stations, reservoirs and dams. This may have a significant impact on civilians if flooding or access to water occurs.

Institutional, legal and normative landscape

During January to March, the Government of Ukraine (GoU) adopted several legislative and secondary regulatory decisions relevant the humanitarian sector, particularly regarding the evacuation of civilians, the organisation of social services at community level, and the

development of local support mechanisms. Although these changes were intended to strengthen the protection of the population in wartime and improve the organisation of assistance, their practical effect will still depend on how quickly communities are able to implement them and whether vulnerable groups can actually access these new mechanisms.

One of the most important changes during this period was Law No. 4779-IX of 10 February 2026[1], which changed the rules on the mandatory evacuation of children and certain vulnerable groups. Previously the evacuation of children from areas of possible or active hostilities effectively depended on the accompaniment of parents or legal guardians, following these changes, the mandatory evacuation of children became possible even in cases where adults refused. The law also introduced the possibility of partial mandatory evacuation for persons who, due to age or health condition, are unable to take care of their own safety, including persons with disabilities, older persons, and other vulnerable categories. In practice, questions remain regarding how such persons will be identified, their accompaniment, and the consistent application of the new rules at local level, which may create risks of unequal access to protection.

In March 2026, the state effectively confirmed the continuation of the development of Resilience Centres: Cabinet of Ministers Resolution No. 281 of 2 March 2026[2] retained the pilot project on the provision of the resilience-building service within the social services financing system and linked it to the budget programme for the development of social services. In practice, this means that Resilience Centres continue to be viewed as part of the local support infrastructure rather than as a one-off initiative. According to the approach of the Ministry of Social Policy, these are barrier-free spaces in communities where people can receive free psychosocial support, an initial consultation, and assistance from a social work specialist. The ministry also explicitly states that the purpose of this service is not only to help people cope with stress and the consequences of war, but also to strengthen volunteer engagement and social cohesion within the community. For communities hosting IDPs, this is important because such centres can serve as a shared place of support for both local residents and displaced persons, reducing tensions and providing a more sustainable entry point to social services.

Another important change was Cabinet of Ministers Resolution No. 64 of 14 January 2026[3], which approved a new procedure for organising the provision of social services, case management, and determining the number of social managers responsible for ensuring and managing cases. This document effectively formalised the role of the community social manager as the responsible person who organises the provision of social services and manages the case. The Resolution also defines a basic staffing approach for such workers: one social manager for a community of up to 10,000 residents, and if the share of vulnerable persons exceeds 20% of the community's population, staffing should be increased. In addition, the community social manager must carry out an initial assessment of the recipient's needs within five working days from the moment the case is identified. For the humanitarian sector, this is important because these workers will be a key channel at local level for identifying vulnerable households, referring them to services, and coordinating support.

[1] https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/4779-20#Text
[2] https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/281-2026-%D0%BF#Text
[3] https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/64-2026-%D0%BF#Text

© DRC Ukraine, Sumy, February 2025, Krystyna Pashkina.

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Analysis of Protection Risks: Threats, their Effects and Vulnerable groups

Protection Risk 1: Unlawful impediments or restrictions to freedom of movement, and forced displacement

Across assessed oblasts, the risk of restrictions to freedom of movement and forced displacement remains **consistently high**, with notable increases compared to the previous reporting period in eastern and south-eastern frontline areas, including Donetsk, Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, and Zaporizhzhia oblasts. This escalation is primarily linked to intensified shelling, drone activity, and proximity to hostilities, which continue to drive both organised and self-initiated displacement. In contrast, the situation in Mykolaiv and Kherson oblasts remains relatively stable, although risks persist at high levels due to ongoing insecurity. In Sumy oblast, a decrease in the proportion of displaced households surveyed compared to the previous quarter suggests a temporary reduction in displacement movements rather than an improvement in the security environment, particularly as risks remain acute in border areas. Geographically, the risk is most severe in frontline and border hromadas, where insecurity directly constrains movement and forces difficult decisions regarding evacuation.

Key Trends

- 22% HH reported multiple displacements since 24 February 2022.
- 69% HH reporting barriers to freedom to movement, including armed conflict (71%) and presence of explosive ordnance (18%).
- Factors influencing displacement include shelling and attacks on civilians (90%), destruction or damage of housing, land or property (76%) and infrastructure damage/destruction (33%).

Groups most affected

The impact of this risk is uneven and shaped by intersecting vulnerabilities. Most affected groups can include:

- Older people
- People with disabilities
- Low-income households
- Families with children are also heavily affected, especially during mandatory evacuation orders.

In practice, this risk manifests through a combination of forced evacuation, delayed or unplanned displacement, and self-imposed movement restrictions. Intensified hostilities, including shelling, missile strikes, and drone attacks, expose civilians to daily threats and significantly limit safe movement within and between communities. In many locations, civilians continue to adapt their movements to insecurity rather than exercising free mobility. As described in Kharkiv oblast, **“alerts, power outages, and distance to unsafe areas- one by one impact daily life**,” illustrating how movement is shaped by overlapping constraints.

Evacuation patterns increasingly reflect unequal and constrained decision-making and links to forced child and family separation (see below section for more information). While mandatory evacuations, particularly of families with children, have expanded in areas such as Donetsk and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts, many households continue to delay departure due to financial, logistical, or social barriers. In some cases, displacement occurs in a reactive or uncoordinated manner, particularly in response to drone threats, limiting access to assistance upon arrival. Elsewhere, populations remain in high-risk areas despite ongoing hostilities. In Sumy oblast, the lack of available housing alternatives forces people to stay in dangerous locations: **“They have nowhere to go. So now they remain in the village, staying with neighbours… They are exposing themselves to daily danger there.”**

In frontline areas, explosive ordnance contamination, damaged infrastructure, and weak early warning systems further constrain safe movement, with some individuals reporting that they only become aware of attacks after they had occurred.

Drivers and barriers: interactions and compounding effects

This risk emerges from the interaction of security, socio-economic, and structural factors that reinforce one another and shape patterns of movement. Ongoing hostilities, including shelling, drone attacks, and proximity to frontline areas, remain the primary drivers, directly threatening civilian safety and prompting displacement. However, the ability to move is not evenly distributed. Economic constraints, particularly the cost of transportation and rental housing, limit the capacity of low-income households to evacuate, while the limited availability of safe accommodation in host communities further restricts options and prolongs exposure to danger.

Mobility-related barriers deepen these challenges. Older persons, individuals with disabilities, and those with health conditions often face significant obstacles to evacuation without external support. At the same time, weaknesses in evacuation systems and limited access to timely, reliable information contribute to delayed or uncoordinated movement, increasing risks during displacement. In some areas, the coexistence of mandatory evacuation policies with high levels of self-evacuation highlights gaps in the reach and accessibility of organised support mechanisms.

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Socio-behavioural factors further influence decision-making. Strong attachment to homes and land, reliance on subsistence livelihoods, and previous negative experiences of displacement, including discrimination, can lead individuals to remain in high-risk areas despite life-threatening conditions. Older persons are particularly affected, often unable or unwilling to leave due to limited alternatives or challenges adapting to displacement. In some contexts, households adopt circular or partial displacement strategies, moving temporarily while maintaining ties to unsafe locations.

As a result of these intersecting factors, access to safe movement is highly unequal, with the most vulnerable least able to leave. This leads to contributes and/or unsafe displacement, increasing exposure to violence and limiting access to essential services.

Protection Risk 2: Attacks on civilians and other unlawful killings, and attacks on civilian objects.

During January to March 2026, the risk of attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure **increased compared to the previous reporting period** across most assessed oblasts, with the most severe impacts reported in frontline, near-frontline and border areas. March 2026 saw the highest number of civilian casualties since July 2025 with at least 211 civilians killed and 1,206 injured[4]. The risk remains consistently high in frontline, near-frontline, and border oblasts, including Donetsk, Kharkiv, Sumy, Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, and Dnipropetrovsk. Older people are disproportionately affected in civilian casualties, representing 50% of those killed and 40% of those injured in frontline communities.[5]

Key Trends:

- 50% HH report poor sense of safety.
- Factors influencing sense of safety for HH includes shelling or threat of shelling (98%), landmines or UXO contamination (21%), and presence of armed or security actors (21%).
- 55% HH reported safety concerns during displacement, including shelling/missile attacks (88%) and movement restrictions (22%).

Groups most affected:

- People with disabilities and chronic illness dependent on electricity powered medical equipment are particularly vulnerable.
- IDP and low-income households disproportionately affected due to limited resources, including inability to invest in coping mechanisms such as charging stations, increasing vulnerability to repeated shocks.

The nature of the threat continues to evolve. Attacks with long-range weapons, particularly missiles and drones, remain the primary cause of civilian harm. At the same time, increased use of first-person view (FPV) drones, including the first recorded strike in Sumy city in January, reflects a shift toward tactics that can impact warning time and increase exposure[6]. In Donetsk Oblast, intensified hostilities led to the introduction of mandatory evacuation orders in parts of Sloviansk, further illustrating the escalation of risk. Across all assessed oblasts, power outages have intensified compared to the previous reporting period and have become a critical cross-cutting factor exacerbating protection risks, particularly in areas affected by attacks on energy infrastructure.

The risk manifests through direct and repeated attacks on residential areas, public spaces, and critical civilian infrastructure, including energy systems, water supply networks, healthcare facilities, transport routes, and communication systems. Civilians experience not only immediate threats of death and injury but also sustained disruption to daily life, services, and livelihoods. In Donetsk Oblast, attacks continue to cause widespread damage and civilian harm. For example, during a strike on Kramatorsk on 11 March, five aerial bombs reportedly injured civilians and damaged dozens of civilian objects. In Kharkiv Oblast, respondents highlighted how even routine activities have become life-threatening: **"Simple situations have serious consequences - need only recall the death of a family from shelling while vacationing at a local resort near the river."**

[4] *UN, Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict- March 2026*
[5] Ibid.
[6] https://cukr.city/city/2026/iak-rosiiany-atakuvaly-sumshchynu-u-liutomu/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Attacks on critical infrastructure generate cascading effects that extend far beyond immediate physical damage, with power outages emerging as a key factor shaping the protective environment. Disruptions to electricity affect heating, water supply, communication, and access to information, as reflected by one respondent in Synelnykivskyi raion, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, who explained, **"When there is no electricity, there is no heating, no water, and everything stops."** At the community level, these disruptions reduce access to essential services, including healthcare, transport, and communication, while also weakening economic activity and increasing reliance on uneven and often informal coping mechanisms. Theses have heightened dependence on resources such as generators and charging stations, which are not equally accessible for low-income households. The absence of street lighting also increases safety risks, particularly for women and girls (see GBV section for more information), children, older persons, and persons with disabilities, and limits mobility, contributing to social isolation, psychological distress, and, in some cases, influencing displacement decisions despite limited alternatives. At the household level, the impact is immediate and severe, directly affecting basic living conditions and requiring constant adaptation, with respondents noting **that "everything stops when the power is out; daily life just doesn't function."** Power disruptions constrain cooking, food storage, and heating, while low voltage reduces the functionality of appliances even when electricity is available. As a result, households increasingly rely on alternative and often unsafe energy sources, such as gas appliances, generators, or candles, heightening exposure to risks including fires and carbon monoxide poisoning. At the same time, outages limit opportunities for remote work and small business activities, further undermining household income and compounding economic vulnerability.

In many locations, communication disruptions mean that people are unable to receive timely alerts or information about security risks. In some cases, early warning systems are ineffective, as reflected by residents in Zolochivska hromada in Kharkiv Oblastwho reported they **"only find out about a missile attack after it has happened."** Public spaces are increasingly perceived as unsafe, particularly due to the growing use of UAVs and FPV drones. In Kherson Oblast, respondents noted **that "people do not feel safe in public spaces due to the increasing frequency of UAV attacks,"** leading to reduced mobility and suspension of social activities. In Sumy, respondents reported gaps in shelter availability that further increase exposure.

Drivers and Barriers: Interactions and Compounding Effects

This risk is primarily driven by ongoing hostilities and systematic attacks on civilian infrastructure, particularly energy systems, alongside evolving tactics such as the increased use of drones that significantly reduce warning time. These threats interact with pre-existing vulnerabilities, including economic instability, limited mobility, and weak infrastructure resilience, intensifying civilian exposure to harm. Damage to critical infrastructure acts as a key compounding factor: power outages disrupt essential services, communication networks, and economic activity, while also constraining access to information and emergency response mechanisms. At the same time, gaps in early warning systems, including air alert systems, and limited availability of shelters reduce civilians' ability to respond to threats in a timely and safe manner. As a result, civilians face sustained exposure to physical harm, service disruption, and deteriorating living conditions.

Protection Risk 3: Presence of mine and other explosive ordnance

Groups most affected:
- Farmers and rural households as land contamination directly restricts cultivation and access to livelihoods.
- IDPs and returnees where contamination prevents safe return, limits access to homes and restricts the use of land and infrastructure.

During January to March 2026, the presence of mines, UXO, explosive remnants of war (ERW) and other explosive ordnance remained consistently high across frontline, near-frontline and recently affected areas. The risk appears broadly stable rather than decreasing, as contamination continues to be reported as an entrenched feature of the protection environment. It remains most severe in rural and frontline areas of Donetsk, Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia, Mykolaiv and Kherson oblasts, particularly where agricultural land, forests, riverbanks, cemeteries, roads, damaged infrastructure and former military sites remain unsafe. In Kherson city and nearby settlements, the risk is further compounded by remote mining and improvised explosive devices, including “pryanik”-type devices that are difficult for civilians to identify.

In practice, explosive ordnance contamination restricts safe movement, access to land, livelihoods, housing, public spaces and essential services. Civilians report avoiding fields, forest belts, coastal areas, riverbanks and other locations where contamination is suspected or confirmed. In Kharkiv Oblast, communities described contamination as a daily constraint rather than an isolated hazard, with one respondent from Pisarivka noting**: “People are still afraid to move freely in certain areas, as there are still cases of people being blown up by mines, especially farmers working on tractors.”**

The risk also affects livelihoods and may push people towards unsafe coping mechanisms. In Donetsk oblast, a farmer managing approximately 30,000 hectares described difficulties accessing formal demining support: **“Due to contamination of the fields, I contacted the State Emergency Service to request demining, but encountered difficulties, including discussions about payment. As a result, I had to find a solution myself and ordered improvised equipment for my combines to clear the land independently.”** This demonstrates how limited clearance capacity and perceived barriers to assistance can increase exposure to injury or death. It should be noted that humanitarian mine action operations are generally not permitted to carry out clearance 20km from the frontline so for affected people in locations like Donetsk Oblast they likely face additional challenges in receiving support with clearance. In Mykolaiv and Kherson oblasts, FGDs also reported cases of people collecting explosive ordnance for sale, reflecting the interaction between economic pressure and hazardous survival strategies.

Drivers and barriers: Interactions and compounding effects:

The root causes of this risk are active hostilities and previous military activity, and the continued presence of unexploded ordnance in civilian areas. These hazards interact with slow and incomplete clearance, insufficient marking of dangerous areas, uneven risk awareness coverage, and limited access to specialised support. As a result, some communities often rely on avoidance, informal knowledge and self-protection measures rather than verified safe access. Economic pressure further compounds exposure. In rural areas, dependence on land for income, food production, grazing or firewood collection pushes some residents to enter or work near contaminated areas despite known risks. Over time, prolonged exposure also contributes to risk habituation, where people become less responsive to warnings and may underestimate danger. The direct consequences are injury, death, loss of livelihoods, restricted freedom of movement and delayed or unsafe return.

Protection Risk 4: Child and Forced Family Separation

During January to March 2026, the risk of child and family separation remained **present across assessed oblasts, though with varying intensity.** The **risk increased compared to the previous reporting period** in some locations, including Sumy and parts of Donetsk and Kherson oblasts, where intensified hostilities, mandatory evacuation measures, and deteriorating security conditions contributed to higher levels of separation. Geographically, the risk is most acute in frontline and near-frontline areas, particularly where insecurity, evacuation requirements, and mobility constraints intersect.

Key Trends:
- 15% HH reported experiencing family separation.
- 31% HH reported their separated family member was displaced to another country outside Ukraine.
- 21% HH reported their separated family member was displaced to another location in Ukraine.

Groups most affected:
- Children are impacted through disrupted caregiving, loss of social networks, and increased exposure due to stress and trauma.
- Older people and people with disabilities when left behind due to limited mobility, health conditions or reluctance to leave.

Child and family separation manifests through displacement, as well as structural and conflict-related factors that prevent families from moving or remaining together. In Donetsk Oblast, mandatory evacuation of families with children from areas such as Sloviansk and Mykolaivka has led to repeated disruption of family and social networks, forcing children to relocate and adapt to new environments while often losing access to familiar support systems. The evolving legal and operational frameworks for evacuation[10] further shape separation risks as the mandatory evacuation of children with guardians from high-risk areas, combined with provisions allowing authorities to evacuate children where parents refuse, may result in separation in extreme cases.

In Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, separation often occurs when households are unable to relocate together due to resource constraints or mobility limitations. Women and children frequently evacuate first, while older persons or other family members remain behind. In Dmytrivka village, participants described how such decisions fragment households and increase caregiving burdens for those who leave, while those remaining face isolation and reduced support. Similarly, rapid and uncoordinated self-evacuation in areas exposed to drone attacks increases the likelihood of separation, particularly for larger households. In addition, reported incidents at checkpoints, where men of conscription age are stopped and mobilised, create further risks to family unity during movement.

Drivers and barriers: interactions and compounding effects

This risk is driven by a combination of insecurity, displacement pressures, institutional measures, and socio-economic constraints which shape family decision-making. Intensified hostilities, shelling, and proximity to frontline areas compel evacuation, while mandatory evacuation policies, particularly for families with children, may result in prioritised or partial movement of household members. Mobility limitations linked to age, disability, or health conditions also prevent some individuals from relocating, leading to separation. Economic barriers, including the cost of transport, housing, and basic needs, further constrain families' ability to move together.

[10] Legal Alert #121: Evacuation of Civilians in Ukraine (available in English and Ukrainian

Protection Risk 5: Discrimination and stigmatisation, denial of resources, opportunities, services and/or humanitarian access.

Compared to the previous reporting period, the risk remains **consistently present** across assessed locations, with a reported increase in Donetsk Oblast, particularly in frontline and displacement-affected communities. In Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhzhia, Mykolaiv, Kherson and Sumy oblasts, the risk remains largely stable but continues to manifest through both direct stigma and structural exclusion. The risk is most severe in areas hosting high numbers of IDPs, frontline and near-frontline communities where insecurity limits service delivery, remote settlements with reduced outreach, and locations where humanitarian resources are limited and targeting criteria are poorly understood.

This risk manifests through a combination of direct stigmatisation, perceived unequal treatment, and indirect exclusion from assistance, employment and housing. In several locations, respondents reported that discrimination is less often openly institutionalised and more frequently linked to administrative, informational, logistical and social barriers. In Donetsk Oblast, FGDs and KIIs indicated that **"support exists, but it is not equally accessible to everyone,"** particularly for people who are unaware of procedures, unable to complete documentation, reluctant to register, or less visible due to self-isolation and restricted movement.

In Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, while overt discrimination was not widely reported, lack of clarity on humanitarian targeting and limited outreach contribute to perceptions of unfairness. In Topyla village, FGD participants explained that **"People compare who received assistance and who did not, and this creates tension,"** showing how limited transparency can undermine trust even when assistance is being provided. In remote parts of Zaporizkyi raion, reduced presence of humanitarian actors and weak local information channels further limit access for households that are not connected to community networks.

Direct stigma against IDPs was most clearly reported in Sumy, Mykolaiv, and Kherson oblasts, according to participants. IDPs described experiencing stigma, housing discrimination, and resentment linked to perceived competition for assistance. In Sumy Oblast, IDPs described negative attitudes from host communities, including perceptions that they receive disproportionate support or place pressure on local resources: **"Yes, there is discrimination against IDPs… Locals think that we are entitled to everything and receive many benefits and money, and because of this, they increase rental prices."** Previously protection monitoring had not identified such concerns in Sumy Oblast. At the same time, positive experiences were also reported, Roma community members who participated in monitoring also reported improved perceptions of social services: **"Before, we were afraid of social services, but now we understand that the attitude is normal."**

Drivers and barriers: interactions and compounding effects

The root causes of this risk include limited humanitarian resources, high levels of need, insecurity, social stereotypes, complex administrative procedures and insufficient inclusive outreach. These factors interact to create both actual and perceived exclusion. In communities where needs exceed available support, targeting becomes necessary, but when criteria are not clearly communicated, excluded households may perceive assistance as unfair or discriminatory. This contributes to frustration, social tension and reduced trust in humanitarian actors and authorities. The direct consequence is unequal or perceived unequal access to resources, services, opportunities and humanitarian assistance.

Protection Risk 6: Disinformation and denial of access to information

During January to March 2026, the risk remained persistent and increased compared to the previous reporting period in several frontline and infrastructure-affected areas. It was most severe in Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, Dnipropetrovsk, Kharkiv, Sumy, Mykolaiv and Kherson oblasts where power outages, damaged communication infrastructure, weak connectivity and limited outreach continued to restrict access to timely, accurate and actionable information. While deliberate denial of information was not widely reported, affected populations consistently described practical barriers that prevent them from receiving information on security risks, assistance, evacuation, service availability and administrative procedures.

The risk manifests through delayed, inconsistent or inaccessible information rather than deliberate denial, particularly where digital channels have become the main means of communication but are not equally accessible. In Donetsk Oblast, power outages and unstable mobile networks limit residents' ability to receive security updates, contact emergency services or access information about services and electricity schedules. Similar patterns were reported in Sumy Oblast, where respondents described unreliable outage information**: "Information about power outage schedules was shared in Telegram channels, but it did not correspond to reality… electricity could be available for only one hour per day, and in some areas there was no power for several days."**

In Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, damaged communication infrastructure and limited outreach contribute to unequal information flows. In Mariivka, unstable or absent mobile coverage prevents residents from receiving alerts, assistance updates or communication from service providers, while in Topyla information is often shared informally between neighbours due to the absence of structured offline channels. This reliance on word-of-mouth was also reported in Kharkiv Oblast, where one participant explained**: "There is a word-of-mouth: someone went to Bohodukhiv, learned the news and continues to broadcast."** In Voloska Balakliya, damage to a mobile communication tower reportedly left residents unable to receive updates on the security situation. In Mykolaiv and Kherson oblasts, respondents did not report deliberate denial of information but noted that information on state services is mainly posted online, while community-level updates are shared through messaging apps that are not always accessible to older persons or people without digital devices. This creates practical exclusion from services. One FGD participant described a case where pension payments stopped because the person was unaware of identification requirements and could not use the Diia application: **"One man was unaware of the need to complete this procedure and faced difficulties using the Diia digital application."**

Drivers and barriers: interactions and compounding effects

The root causes of this risk include damaged communication infrastructure, frequent power outages, weak or inconsistent warning systems, limited outreach capacity, reliance on digital communication, and insufficiently clear messaging from authorities and humanitarian actors. These factors interact with low digital literacy, lack of devices, limited internet access, geographic isolation and reduced mobility. As a result, people who already face barriers to movement or service access are also less likely to receive timely information.

The direct consequence is delayed or uninformed decision-making, including missed assistance, delayed evacuation, inability to access services, and reduced preparedness for security incidents or outages. Secondary protection risks include increased anxiety, social isolation, reduced access to services and assistance, exclusion from administrative benefits, heightened exposure to insecurity, vulnerability to misinformation, and reduced trust in authorities and humanitarian actors.

Protection Risk 7: Gender Based Violence

During the reporting period, GBV risks remained **present but significantly underreported** across assessed locations. Compared to the previous reporting period, the overall risk appears **generally stable** in several oblasts, including Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporizhzhia, but qualitative findings indicate persistent and, in some locations, increasing risks linked to intimate partner violence, unsafe public spaces, and power outages. The risk remains most severe in frontline and displacement-affected communities, collective sites, rural areas with limited services, and locations experiencing prolonged electricity outages or inadequate lighting.

GBV primarily manifests through intimate partner violence, sexual harassment, fear of movement after dark, unsafe living conditions, and barriers to disclosure and support. In Donetsk Oblast, GBV remains largely hidden, with local authorities often reporting few or no cases, while FGDs and KIIs indicate recurring intimate partner violence within households. One respondent described a repeated pattern of alcohol-related violence after pension payments: **"When the pension comes, he starts drinking and becomes aggressive… I call the police, but then I feel sorry for him, he is my son."** This illustrates how family dependency, stigma and reluctance to engage formal mechanisms can keep survivors in abusive environments.

In Kharkiv Oblast, the risk environment has not significantly changed, but qualitative findings suggest increased partner violence, particularly in households of military personnel. In Rohanska hromada, one woman linked conflict-related stress and perceived impunity to violence at home, stating that **"it is no secret that military men release stress at home. On duty they are held accountable, but at home there are no consequences."** Across Sumy, Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, power outages, lack of street lighting and unsafe public environments increase risks for women and girls, particularly after dark. In Sumy Oblast, women and girls reported restricting movement due to darkness, non-functioning elevators and unlocked building entrances. One participant explained: **"When you walk down the street without lighting, especially in the evening, it becomes very scary. You don't know who might appear or what danger it could pose."** In Mariivka, Zaporizhzhia Oblast, women and girls similarly reduced movement during outages due to the lack of electricity and street lighting. In Kherson Oblast, GBV safety audits in collective sites identified elevated risks linked to inadequate infrastructure, gaps in site management and limited referral systems. Poor lighting, lack of sex-segregated WASH facilities, insufficient locks and privacy, weak access control and limited confidential reporting mechanisms create risks of harassment, theft and violence in shared living spaces. Women, girls, older persons and persons with disabilities reported feeling unsafe moving around sites after dark, particularly when sanitation facilities are located outside residential units.

Drivers and barriers: interactions and compounding effects:

The root causes of GBV risks include prolonged insecurity, displacement, economic hardship, alcohol misuse, conflict-related trauma, mobilisation-related stress, and infrastructure challenges. These factors interact at household and community levels: financial pressure, psychological distress, confinement during outages and disrupted services can escalate tensions, while darkness, unsafe WASH facilities, poor access control and weak lighting increase risks in public spaces and collective sites. Barriers to prevention and response remain substantial. GBV is widely treated as a private or sensitive issue, contributing to stigma, shame and underreporting. Survivors may fear disclosure, lack trust in services, depend economically or emotionally on perpetrators, or doubt that reporting will lead to meaningful protection. The direct consequence is continued exposure to violence, harassment and fear, with many incidents remaining hidden or unresolved.

Protection Risk 8: Impediments and/or restrictions to access to legal identity, remedies and justice

During January to March 2026, impediments to accessing legal identity, remedies and justice remained consistently high across assessed locations, with no significant improvement reported. The risk is most severe in frontline, near-frontline, rural, remote and displacement-affected communities, particularly in Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, Dnipropetrovsk, Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, Kherson and Sumy oblasts.

Key Trends:
- 21% HH report lacking HLP documentation.
- 49% HH report barriers to obtaining documentation.
- Key barriers to obtaining documentation include cost of administrative procedures (47%), length of administrative procedures (36%) and lack of information (36%).

Groups most affected:
- IDPs and conflict-affected people where documents were lost, archives and/or property inaccessible due to conflict.
- Low-income households affected by administrative costs, legal fees, transport expenses etc.

This risk manifests through restricted access to civil documentation, HLP documentation, social benefits, pensions, compensation mechanisms and administrative or judicial remedies. In Donetsk Oblast, ongoing shelling, reduced transportation and insecurity limit physical access to institutions, while lack of documentation and low awareness of procedures further prevent people from accessing social and administrative services. HLP issues are particularly acute in rural areas, where residents may lack formal ownership documents, have incomplete inheritance procedures, or have lost documents due to hostilities.

Across Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, affected populations, particularly IDPs, face persistent difficulties restoring or confirming civil documents required for benefits, healthcare and administrative services. These challenges are more acute for people displaced from occupied or hard-to-access areas, where archives may be unavailable or destroyed. In Vilniansk city, respondents described compensation procedures as complex and lengthy**: "Not everyone can collect all documents, and the process takes too long."** Households whose property is located in occupied or active conflict areas are often unable to prove ownership rights or access required documentation, resulting in de facto exclusion from compensation.

In Kharkiv Oblast, the issue was reported less often as a stand-alone legal concern compared to the previous period, but underlying barriers remain unresolved. Households with damaged or destroyed housing continue to face gaps in access to remedies. In Rohanska hromada, respondents noted **that "not all needs are fully met,"** while in Lozivska hromada authorities reported using temporary arrangements, including vacant houses, when compensation was inaccessible to help address immediate shelter needs but do not replace access to formal legal remedies.

In Mykolaiv and Kherson oblasts, lack of ownership documents remains a key barrier to eRecovery compensation, especially where housing was purchased informally or inheritance documentation is incomplete. In Kherson Oblast, low awareness of remote assessment procedures and limited commission capacity further restrict access. Loss of personal documents also affects access to collective sites and IDP registration, particularly in cases of secondary displacement.
In Sumy Oblast, 40% of surveyed households reported lacking documents confirming housing ownership. High costs, lack of information and lengthy procedures remain key barriers. Security conditions further disrupt administrative access, as offices suspend operations during air raid alerts. FGDs in Sumy also highlighted gaps affecting people with Russian citizenship living in border communities in Sumy who have economic and family ties in Ukraine and expired temporary

residence permits: **"These are people without any support, people with Russian passports. Their residence permits have expired and are not being renewed due to martial law."**

Drivers and barriers: interactions and compounding effects

The root causes of this risk include loss or absence of civil and property documentation, destruction or inaccessibility of archives, incomplete inheritance procedures, informal property transactions, complex administrative and judicial processes, limited institutional capacity, and insecurity. These drivers interact with displacement, poverty, reduced mobility and limited access to information, leaving affected people unable to independently navigate legal procedures.

Key barriers include high administrative costs, transport costs, distance to service points, restricted access to registrars and commissions, limited legal aid, lack of clear step-by-step guidance, lengthy procedures, low digital literacy and distrust in institutions. In areas affected by active hostilities, air raid alerts, shelling and drone threats further interrupt access to administrative offices and delay completion of procedures. Where properties are located in occupied, inaccessible or active conflict areas, people may be unable to retrieve documents or complete inspections, blocking access to compensation even when damage is evident.

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The direct consequence is delayed or denied access to legal identity, social benefits, pensions, compensation and housing-related remedies. Secondary protection risks include lack of access to safe and adequate housing, continued residence in unsafe or damaged housing, prolonged displacement, property disputes, loss of HLP rights, exclusion from services due to lack of documentation, increased financial burden and debt, heightened dependence on humanitarian assistance, social tension linked to perceived inequality in compensation, and reduced trust in state institutions.

Capacities to Address Protection Threats

Community Capacities

Across assessed locations, communities continue to rely heavily on informal, adaptive coping mechanisms as the primary means of mitigating protection risks. Family networks, neighbours, and local social ties play a central role in facilitating evacuation, sharing information, and providing practical and emotional support. In Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, intercommunity relations are generally perceived as positive, enabling households to mobilise support quickly in response to insecurity or service gaps. Informal systems are also critical in areas with weak communication infrastructure, where information is often disseminated through neighbours and word-of-mouth. In Sumy Oblast, communities reported a high level of self-organisation and mutual support, with both IDPs and host populations engaging in collective coping strategies. Similar patterns were observed in Kharkiv Oblast, where neighbours and volunteers were reported to support older persons with humanitarian aid, transport and urgent needs, and maintain regular contact with isolated households. Despite these strengths, community capacities are uneven and can often be exclusionary. Individuals with limited mobility, weak social networks, or social isolation, particularly older persons living alone, persons with disabilities, and marginalised households, are less able to benefit from these informal systems. Moreover, these coping strategies are largely reactive and short-term, addressing immediate needs without resolving underlying risks. The heavy reliance on community-level support also reflects a shift of responsibility from formal systems to households, increasing pressure on already vulnerable populations.

Institutional/Humanitarian Capacities

Institutional and humanitarian actors provide essential but uneven support across assessed locations. Institutional capacity is often constrained by high caseloads, limited human resources, complex administrative procedures, and insecurity, leading to delays and reduced accessibility of services. In rural and frontline-adjacent settlements, physical access to services remains limited due to distance, transport constraints, and safety risks. Awareness of available services is also insufficient, as affected populations may lack information or face barriers in navigating administrative processes. Humanitarian coverage is uneven, with limited presence in remote or high-risk areas where needs are often greatest. In Mykolaiv and Kherson oblasts, collective sites face challenges related to overcrowding, infrastructure conditions and safety. In addition, gaps in transparency of targeting criteria and feedback mechanisms contribute to reduced trust in assistance systems. Across locations, specialised services remain limited. In Kharkiv Oblast, for example, while general protection and legal services are available, dedicated services and referral pathways for specific risks (such as trafficking) are not consistently present at community level.

Key Focus Areas Shaping the Protection Environment

Housing, land and property insecurity as a structural driver of protection risks

Across assessed locations, housing, land and property (HLP) insecurity remains a **central structural driver** shaping protection risks, particularly in frontline, displacement-affected and resource-constrained settings. The issue extends beyond physical damage to housing and includes **legal uncertainty, insecure tenure, lack of documentation, and barriers to compensation**, which collectively influence displacement patterns, social cohesion, and access to services.

At community level, HLP insecurity contributes to prolonged displacement, pressure on host communities, and increased social tensions. In Donetsk, Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, limited access to compensation and slow recovery processes reduce housing availability, particularly in urban centres such as Dnipro and Zaporizhzhia cities, increasing competition for accommodation and exacerbating tensions. In Sumy Oblast, negative attitudes towards IDPs and inflated rental prices further strain relations between host communities and displaced populations. In Kharkiv Oblast, communities continue to absorb displaced populations through temporary and uneven arrangements, including the use of vacant housing when compensation is unavailable. However, these stopgap solutions do not address underlying housing needs and place additional pressure on local systems. Similarly, in Kherson Oblast, prolonged displacement and housing shortages have led to overcrowding in collective sites, often located in high-risk areas exposed to shelling and drone activity, which also limits humanitarian access and the predictability of service delivery.

Across locations, lack of access to compensation, often due to missing documentation, administrative barriers or inability to verify damage in insecure areas, reinforces inequality and frustration. In Sumy Oblast, respondents highlighted disparities in access to housing certificates: **“People living within the 5-kilometer zone cannot receive certificates, and they are frustrated with those who do.”** These dynamics contribute to reduced social cohesion and increased perceptions of unfairness.

At household level, HLP insecurity directly shapes living conditions, financial stability, and decision-making. Many households remain in damaged, unsafe or inadequate housing due to inability to access compensation, complete administrative procedures, or afford alternative accommodation. In Kharkiv Oblast, a majority of households reported concerns related to safety, housing condition, and risk of eviction, with many living in partially damaged housing and lacking access to durable solutions. In Donetsk Oblast, missing ownership documents and unresolved inheritance procedures prevent households from accessing compensation, forcing them to remain in unsafe conditions. In Mykolaiv and Kherson oblasts, households frequently resort to self-repair of damaged housing, particularly where ownership is unclear or humanitarian actors cannot intervene. As one participant explained: **“Some people have to live in damaged houses — without windows or with leaking roofs… So people board up the windows, patch the roofs, and try to make the place livable themselves.”** In Sumy Oblast, similar challenges are compounded by the lack of formal rental agreements, with 87.5% of tenants relying on verbal arrangements, increasing risks of eviction and instability.

For displaced households, insecure tenure and lack of housing options lead to dependence on collective sites or informal arrangements, often with substandard conditions, overcrowding, and limited privacy. In Kherson Oblast, these conditions contribute to increased household tensions and heightened protection risks, including GBV. At the same time, high rental costs and limited housing availability influence decisions to delay displacement, return prematurely to unsafe areas, or remain in high-risk locations. In Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, unresolved HLP issues also affect long-term planning, with some households investing their own limited resources into repairs despite uncertainty around compensation eligibility. For IDPs with property in occupied or inaccessible areas, inability to conduct inspections or retrieve documentation results in prolonged displacement and lack of durable solutions.

Overall, households are frequently forced to make trade-offs between safety, affordability, and legal security, choosing between remaining in unsafe or damaged housing, entering insecure rental arrangements, or relocating without guarantees of stability.

Return movement dynamics

Across assessed locations, return dynamics remain uneven and largely constrained by insecurity, damaged housing, limited services, and economic pressure. While some households express an intention to return, returns are often not fully safe, voluntary, or sustainable. In many cases, decisions are driven less by improved conditions in areas of origin and more by limited alternatives in displacement, including high rental costs, lack of accommodation, unemployment, discrimination, or dependency on temporary arrangements. The main drivers of return are attachment to home and land, lack of affordable housing in displacement areas, limited income opportunities, restoration of basic services, and the desire to regain access to property, family networks and livelihoods. In Donetsk Oblast, respondents highlighted the lack of perceived alternatives: **“Where would we go? We are not needed anywhere.”** Similarly, in Kherson Oblast, emotional attachment remains a strong factor: **“Even those who relocated to Khmelnytskyi are coming back, because their home is here and they feel deeply connected to their land.”**

At the same time, non-return is primarily driven by continued hostilities, shelling, mine contamination, damaged housing, lack of functioning infrastructure, limited access to compensation, and weak livelihood opportunities. In Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, IDPs cited ongoing hostilities, damaged housing and lack of functioning infrastructure as key reasons for not returning. In Kharkiv Oblast, return decisions increasingly depend on whether minimum conditions for daily life have been restored, including services, transport, pensions, shops and infrastructure, rather than on security alone. Overall, many returns cannot be considered fully safe or sustainable. In several locations, households return to areas where shelling, damaged infrastructure, limited services or explosive ordnance risks persist. Returns may appear voluntary, but are often shaped by economic hardship, housing insecurity, discrimination in displacement areas, or exhaustion from prolonged displacement. As noted in Sumy Oblast, the slight increase in return intentions appears driven primarily by economic constraints rather than improved security.

At community level, return and non-return dynamics create fluid, circular and difficult-to-predict population movements. In Donetsk Oblast, formal evacuations continue alongside informal returns and repeated displacement, complicating population tracking, service planning and humanitarian response. Similar patterns are observed in Kharkiv Oblast, where return, onward movement and local absorption overlap rather than follow a linear pattern. Low levels of return also place continued pressure on host communities, particularly urban centres such as Dnipro, Zaporizhzhia

and Sumy, where housing, services and infrastructure are already strained. Conversely, limited return to areas of origin slows recovery, reduces economic and social activity, and weakens local resilience. In return areas, even modest population increases can place pressure on healthcare, social services and local administration, especially where communities are ageing, infrastructure is damaged, or frontline proximity limits staffing and outreach.

At household level, return decisions are often pragmatic coping strategies rather than indicators of durable solutions. Families weigh physical safety against housing costs, employment, access to services, property protection, social ties and the sustainability of displacement. In Sumy Oblast, lack of collective accommodation and high rental costs push some people to remain in or return to border areas. One service provider noted: "People fleeing border areas, even if they manage to leave with just a suitcase, arrive in uncertainty. This pushes people to remain in border areas." Households may return because displacement arrangements are temporary or financially unsustainable. In Kharkiv Oblast, one returnee explained**: "In Poltava region it was safer, but we were staying with friends and it was only temporary."** Others return because they cannot find work or afford rent elsewhere. In Sumy Oblast, one respondent described a family member returning to the village after being unable to secure employment in Sumy.

Some households adopt partial or circular movement patterns, with only some members returning or moving back and forth between areas of origin and displacement. Others register as IDPs to access assistance and later return, reflecting short-term survival strategies rather than sustainable reintegration. These decisions increase exposure to renewed displacement, insecurity, damaged housing, limited services and psychological distress. Overall, return movements are shaped by trade-offs between safety, dignity and survival. Many households are attempting to restore normalcy and reduce the financial and social strain of displacement, but conditions in areas of origin often remain insufficient for safe, voluntary and sustainable return.

Widespread, unaddressed psychological distress and its impact on recovery

Across all assessed oblasts, psychological distress remains widespread, persistent, and insufficiently addressed, emerging as a cross-cutting factor that undermines recovery, social cohesion, and individual coping capacity. While the intensity and drivers vary by location, the overall trend indicates that distress has either increased compared to the previous reporting period or shifted toward more acute, survival-oriented stress responses, particularly in frontline and high-risk areas.

Commonly reported symptoms across locations include anxiety, fear, emotional instability, chronic fatigue, irritability, apathy, and social isolation. In Donetsk Oblast, 40.5% of adults reported feeling sad or depressed, 38.1% reported anxiety, and 31% reported agitation or mood swings, while fear remains the dominant symptom among children. Similarly, in Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, households identified fear of being killed or injured (75%), fear of property damage (70.8%), and displacement-related stress (45.8%) as key stressors. In Kharkiv Oblast, distress has shifted toward immediate survival concerns, with sharp increases in fear of injury and property damage, indicating a reduced focus on long-term planning. This pattern is echoed in Sumy and Kherson oblasts, where uncertainty and proximity to hostilities lead people to adopt short-term coping strategies: **"You live one day at a time. You don't know what will happen tomorrow or even now."**

Psychological distress directly shapes behaviour and decision-making. Across all locations, households report reduced capacity for long-term planning, increased reliance on short-term or reactive coping strategies, and avoidance of public spaces or services due to fear. Negative coping mechanisms, particularly alcohol use, social withdrawal, and emotional disengagement, are increasingly observed, alongside increased use of medication without engagement in psychosocial support. Stigma and lack of trust in services further limit help-seeking behaviours, as reflected in Kharkiv Oblast: **“I’m not crazy.”**

At community level, widespread distress contributes to declining social cohesion, reduced participation, and increased tensions. High stress levels, combined with insecurity and service disruptions, limit opportunities for social interaction and collective action. In Mykolaiv Oblast, social workers noted a reduced capacity for dialogue: **“People cannot hear or listen to one another,”** while expectations for immediate solutions are increasing. Communities increasingly shift from collective to individual coping strategies, weakening informal support networks over time. Avoidance of social gatherings, reduced participation in community life, and declining trust in institutions are consistently reported. In Sumy Oblast, power outages and insecurity further reduce interaction: **“People communicated less, stayed in their apartments more… and this only increased stress.”**

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At household level, psychological distress affects relationships, daily functioning, and coping capacity. Families report increased emotional strain, conflict, and, in some cases, breakdown of relationships. In Donetsk and Kherson oblasts, rising domestic tensions and increased reporting of violence are linked to prolonged stress and economic hardship. Households frequently restrict movement due to fear, limiting access to services, livelihoods, and social support. In Kharkiv Oblast, even routine activities are perceived as risky: **“We are afraid of being injured even when going to**

collect humanitarian assistance." Similarly, in Sumy, Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, fear and uncertainty lead to reduced engagement with institutions and delayed decision-making. Distress also contributes to increased interpersonal conflict and visible negative coping behaviours, including alcohol misuse. In several locations, tensions within communities are exacerbated by irritability, low tolerance for stress, and frustration linked to service disruptions and insecurity. The absence of safe community spaces and limited availability of psychosocial support services further restrict opportunities for recovery and social engagement.

At the same time, households adopt a range of coping responses. While some engage in adaptive strategies such as participating in community activities or seeking support through informal networks, others resort to avoidance or risky behaviours. As noted in Kherson Oblast: **"You sit in the pub… and the crowd keeps growing."** Overall, unaddressed psychological distress significantly undermines resilience and recovery. It limits households' ability to make informed decisions, reduces engagement with services, increases exposure to protection risks, and contributes to a cycle of vulnerability at both individual and community levels.

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Recommendations

Donors and Foreign Diplomatic Missions

- **Provide flexible, multi-year funding** to humanitarian actors operating in frontline and rural areas (Donetsk, Kharkiv, Sumy, Zaporizhzhia, Dnipropetrovsk and Kherson oblasts) to enable rapid adaptation of service delivery modalities during shelling, power outages, and access constraints, including mobile and remote programming.
- **Increase dedicated funding for MHPSS and GBV programming**, with a focus on community-based, confidential and accessible services, in response to widespread psychological distress, underreporting of GBV, and increased risks linked to outages and insecurity.
- **Fund interventions that support** sustainable livelihood and energy interventions to address the root causes of both financial barriers and protection risks caused by power outages.
- **Fund humanitarian programming where targeting is informed by protection vulnerabilities.**

Protection actors (Civil Society, UN Agencies, and Non-Governmental Organisations)

- **Expand mobile protection teams** to deliver case management, legal counselling, and outreach in remote and frontline communities where transport, insecurity, and cost limit access to services (Donetsk, Kherson, Zaporizhzhia and Kharkiv oblasts).
- **Establish structured community-based information systems** (e.g. focal points, in-person sessions, notice boards) in areas with communication disruptions to address gaps in access to information and reduce reliance on informal or delayed communication.
- **Strengthen accountability to affected populations** by clearly communicating targeting criteria, providing feedback on non-selection, and establishing accessible complaints mechanisms to reduce tensions linked to perceived inequality in aid distribution.
- **Develop and disseminate simplified, accessible service information materials** (e.g. unified protection leaflets) to ensure that older persons, persons with disabilities, and digitally excluded populations can access information on available services.
- **Integrate protection risk mitigation across sectors**, ensuring safe access to services, inclusion of vulnerable groups, and consideration of risks linked to power outages, mobility constraints, and insecurity.

Local authorities

- **Simplify and decentralise administrative procedures** for civil documentation, HLP registration, and access to social benefits, including expanding mobile administrative services in remote and conflict-affected areas.
- **Improve transport accessibility** by establishing regular, affordable transport routes to service hubs (e.g. healthcare, administrative centres), and providing social transport options for vulnerable groups.
- **Invest in energy resilience and infrastructure**, including backup power solutions for public services, to ensure continuity of healthcare, education, and communication during outages.
- **Expand safe and affordable housing solutions**, including rental support and utilisation of vacant buildings for IDPs, to address widespread housing insecurity and reduce unsafe living conditions.
- **Conduct community-level awareness campaigns** on available services, legal procedures, and assistance programmes to reduce information gaps and improve access.

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Danish Refugee Council | Borgergade 10 | DK – 1300 Copenhagen K | Tel.: +45 33 73 50 00 | drc@drc.ngo | www.drc.ngo