In Moscow, volunteers gather aid as thousands flee border

AFP – At an aid collection point in Moscow, a small group of volunteers sorted through a mountain of donations left for those fleeing fighting near the Ukrainian border.
“Some are without clothes, some are without shoes,” said 21-year-old volunteer Ilya Krestyaninov, as his colleagues emptied bags filled with children’s toys, baby food and blankets.

Ukraine launched a surprise offensive into the Russian border region of Kursk last Tuesday, capturing over two dozen towns and villages in the most significant cross-border attack on Russian soil since World War II.

The incursion comes as Russia’s Ukraine offensive stretches through its third year, with Russian forces holding swathes of Ukrainian territory and firing barrages of missiles and drones at Ukrainian cities.

Over 120,000 people have fled the fighting in Kursk region, according to authorities, with volunteers gathering donations for those seeking refuge in the capital.

“The biggest thing they bring in is children’s toys,” said 22-year-old organiser Yekaterina Dobrynina, as she sorted through piles of clothes.

“What we need is new bedding, sleeping bags, blankets and some other things. Because the nights are already getting quite chilly,” she said.

The aid point was put together by volunteers for Yekaterina Duntsova and Boris Nadezhdin, liberal politicians who tried unsuccessfully to challenge Vladimir Putin in March’s presidential elections.

But Ilya and Yekaterina said they felt the need to help, regardless of their political affiliation.

“It’s not about politics, because it’s human life,” said Dobrynina, a member of the youth section of Duntsova’s Dawn party.

“Frankly, I don’t care what kind of person I help,” she added.

Outside their rented office space in Moscow, Dobrynina added the finishing touches to a handwritten sign marking the entrance to the aid point.

Fuelled by social media and appeals from Russian rap star Noize MC, the volunteers said they have received dozens of donations in the space of two days.

— ‘What can I do?’ —

State media has given few details about the level of destruction near the border, a sign the Kremlin is seeking to maintain a semblance of normality.

“I don’t know what’s going on there. I have no contacts, no relatives,” said 32-year-old donor Vitaly.

Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin said 1.8 billion rubles ($20 million) had been allocated to support people who had lost their homes.

But some donors coming to the aid point were sceptical the government was giving enough to the evacuees.

“There is little help from the state,” said 28-year-old midwife Daria Chistopolskaya.

“I think that the state does not care enough about such people, and people themselves should help each other in such situations,” she said.

Dobrynina said she had been contacted by people who had

nothing.

“One girl even wrote to me today saying, ‘I don’t have any money, I don’t have anything, but what I can do?'”

“Unfortunately we don’t know how long this situation will continue,” she said.

Authorities in Kursk announced on Monday they were widening their evacuation area to include Belovsky district, home to some 14,000 residents. The neighbouring Belgorod region also said it was evacuating its border district of Krasnoyaruzhsky.

“Our citizens, they suffer,” said 31-year-old lawyer Ivan, who donated to the collection drive.

“And it seems to me that at times like this we need to show solidarity.”

— ‘Won’t be abandoned’ —

At another collection point run by a municipal centre called “Moscow Volunteer”, organisers were sorting donated food, shampoo and sanitary towels into boxes.

“Over the weekend we saw a very big surge in activity from Muscovites,” said the centre’s 29-year-old deputy director Andrei Ryumin.

“And donations are continuing to flow in. People bring cereals, tins, personal hygiene items.”

Yulia Rakhmanova, a beautician, came in with her teenage daughter, bringing a children’s jacket and food.

“Everyone risks finding themselves in this situation,” she said.

“We all need to know that we won’t be abandoned.”

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