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## United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6225

April 7, 2022

His Excellency  
Mr. António Guterres  
Secretary-General of the United Nations  
760 United Nations Plaza  
New York, NY 10017

Dear Secretary-General Guterres:

As reports emerge of the widespread and systematic use of rape and sexual violence against Ukrainian women and girls by Russian soldiers, I urge the United Nations to take every possible measure to prevent and respond to gender-based violence (GBV) in this conflict and to hold perpetrators accountable. Without adequate protections and responses, more Ukrainian women and girls remain at grave risk of rape and sexual assault each passing day of this brutal war. In areas retaken from retreating Russian forces, the world has been given a glimpse into the horrifying war crimes committed against Ukrainians, including the use of rape and sexual assault. The United Nations must prioritize robust protection programming for Ukrainian women and girls and move to swiftly ensure effective independent investigations into war crimes committed in Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine.

Furthermore, I am writing to urge you to take immediate action to address the impact of the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine and neighboring countries on women, children, and other populations at particular risk. Women and children comprise the majority of the more than 4 million people who have fled Ukraine and the millions forcibly displaced within the country. Their unique needs in emergencies urgently require responses to prevent human trafficking and exploitation and ensure their access to lifesaving health services and protection. By upholding best practices and commitments to women and girls and addressing these concerns from the earliest stages, the United Nations can save lives and reduce suffering.

Displaced women, girls, and unaccompanied children are particularly at risk of human trafficking, sexual exploitation, and abuse, within Ukraine, en route as they flee, and once they cross borders. In addition, women and girls are facing critical unmet health needs, especially as vital health infrastructure is destroyed. In the next three months, 80,000 Ukrainian women and girls are expected to give birth, and there is an urgent need to prioritize adequate maternal health care and other sexual and reproductive health services, both in Ukraine and in refugee hosting countries. Psychosocial assistance is also needed to cope with the trauma of GBV, family separation, violence, and displacement, particularly for the almost half a million children impacted by the conflict who are now facing grave risks to their wellbeing.

The United Nations' response so far has been insufficient to address these concerns. This is creating significant gaps in protection for women, children, and other groups at risk, which will only worsen as the crisis continues to escalate. As the United Nations responds to the ongoing conflict and humanitarian emergency, I call on the United Nations to swiftly take the following steps:

- **Implement and support robust war crimes accountability measures** – The United Nations should immediately establish independent investigations into war crimes, including rape and sexual assault, in Bucha and in other areas of Ukraine occupied by Russian forces. UN agencies should supply investigations with the resources and personnel to be effective and provide adequate training to UN staff

to increase training for evidence collection, atrocity prevention, and respect for international humanitarian and human rights law.

- **Prioritize GBV prevention and response** – The UN response should immediately institute measures to reduce GBV risks across all UN agency efforts and utilize technical assistance and local expertise where possible to provide appropriate support to survivors, including medical, legal, and psychosocial services, as well as safe shelters for women and girls. Assistance should strengthen coordination between providers; establish prevention measures; and provide accessible GBV referral mechanisms, case management, and post-rape care.
- **Urgently prioritize prevention of human trafficking and appropriate protection measures, including child protection, at borders, reception areas, and inside Ukraine** – There is an urgent need for robust oversight, targeted protection measures, and substantial resources to address the significant safety concerns of unaccompanied children, persons with disabilities, and younger women and adolescent girls at particular risk of trafficking and exploitation.
- **Ensure women and girls can safely access the full spectrum of lifesaving health services** – Health services must address the specific needs of women and girls, including the full range of sexual and reproductive health and rights, such as maternal health care, dignity kits, and post-rape support. The United Nations should bolster the work of local women’s organizations, as well as UNFPA, that are providing mobile health services, training frontline health workers, and operating hotlines and crisis rooms for GBV survivors.
- **Address intersecting factors that hinder access to services** – Various factors such as age, gender, and disability impede displaced persons’ ability to access necessary services. The United Nations must make addressing such factors an explicit component of the humanitarian response to ensure full accessibility of services. Assistance should also provide flexible financial and logistical support to local organizations, including women’s, LGBTQI+, youth, and disability rights organizations, to identify and meet needs. Furthermore, the United Nations should prioritize engaging affected women in the design, implementation, and evaluation of humanitarian relief programs from the start.

For too long, the needs of women and girls in conflict have been an afterthought in the international response to conflict and humanitarian emergencies, despite the clear systematic use of rape and sexual violence as a weapon of war and the disproportionate impact of humanitarian crises on women and girls. The international community must work to prevent ongoing war crimes in Ukraine and bring justice for the Ukrainian women and girls suffering at the hands of Russian forces. As the leader of the international humanitarian response, the United Nations is also uniquely positioned to elevate the needs of women, girls, and other at-risk populations from Ukraine. I strongly urge the United Nations to immediately take steps to address these concerns in its response to the Ukraine conflict and humanitarian crisis.

Sincerely,



Robert Menendez  
Chairman