

April 6, 2022

Dear Minister Joly,
Dear Minister Sajjan,

Like you, our hearts are heavy as we watch news reports coming out of Ukraine and communicate with partners and staff continuing to work in Ukraine.

Before developing global partnerships for relief, development and peace work, Mennonite Central Committee was originally founded to respond to a crisis in what is now Ukraine in the 1920s. We opened soup kitchens to provide relief to thousands of starving families. A century later, we continue to work in Ukraine by supporting local faith-based partners working in peace, trauma healing and meeting basic human needs. We also have programming around the world in other ongoing conflict scenarios like Colombia, Syria, Afghanistan, and Ethiopia. In all our work, we partner with grassroots and faith-based organizations and churches dedicated to peace in their local contexts.

We recognize the challenges you face in responding to recent Russian military aggression in Ukraine. Like you, we are also concerned with the humanitarian impact of this conflict and with peace globally. It is a challenge to discern how to respond without aggravating conflict dynamics. The goal is to protect civilians, prevent further harm and seek long-lasting peace. While there are no easy answers, we know from the experiences of partners that efforts focused on peace and nonviolent solutions make a positive difference.

We urge the Canadian government to play a leading role in advocating for the use of nonviolent tools, such as diplomacy, disarmament, conflict resolution, international courts and support for grassroots peacebuilding and nonviolent resistance in responding to the conflict in Ukraine, and all conflicts globally. We urge caution around both the selling and providing of arms and the direct participation with or training of those involved in military missions. As we have learned from other contemporary conflicts, foreign military interventions can easily exacerbate tensions between groups.

We are also concerned about recent conversations and announcements about an increase in military spending in general within the Canadian defence budget. Instead, we encourage an increase in Official Development assistance (ODA) spending and human security, with a focus on conflict prevention and resolution as a government priority in response to global conflict and other crises, like climate change and COVID-19. This spending can include a focus on local peacebuilders, especially those connected with grassroots and community-based organizations, such as churches and faith groups, among others.

For example, in Ukraine, local church partners are also doing their best to provide essential support for people who were struggling even before the conflict broke out. Churches are sharing contact information of people who are elderly, disabled or sick and those who normally are unable to leave their homes. That sharing of information means vulnerable people can receive resources they wouldn't be able to get themselves while their city is experiencing violence. Churches have been hubs for supply distribution, and they also serve as places of comfort during times of trauma and stress. We know from the experience of partners that a focus on trauma healing, peacebuilding and humanitarian support will continue to be urgently needed, now and when the fighting ceases, for all nationalities impacted by this conflict.

We encourage caution around how government officials communicate about military and humanitarian support, being careful not to confuse the two. ODA funding should not be used for military activities. In all public conversations, we urge restraint around binary and inflammatory language and rhetoric that portrays Russians, especially Russian civilians, as the enemy.

We also urge careful analysis of the unintended humanitarian impacts of sanctions, especially broad-based sanctions against Russia. Even when intended to send a strong message against military actions, sanctions can hurt vulnerable populations, including vulnerable Russians, and make the provision of humanitarian support more challenging. We ask for a focus on ensuring human dignity and support for the most vulnerable in all our actions, including in the measured application of sanctions.

We ask that all Canadian government actions, from public statements to behind-the-scenes engagement, to budgeting decisions, integrate a lens of peace and conflict transformation. For MCC, peace is more than a wish, it is our work. We welcome conversation about how we can best support you in our joint work for peace.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rick Bauman", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Rick Cober Bauman
Executive Director, MCC Canada

CC:

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