Singapore

Meet the Singaporean couple building bomb-proof homes, providing power generators in Ukraine

Beyond putting roofs over people's heads, the couple has two other humanitarian projects in the country – bringing in generators for energy and helping expectant mothers who have lost their husbands or homes to war.

FAST

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Mr Rudy Taslim and Ms Lam Bao Yan with Ukrainians they have helped. (Picture: Lam Bao Yan)

SINGAPORE: Singaporean couple Mr Rudy Taslim and Ms Lam Bao Yan know the dangers of travelling to war-torn Ukraine.

But they said the humanitarian needs outweigh the risks.

Before heading there, both husband and wife wrote their wills.

The pair then travelled at their own cost to the city of Donetsk in eastern Ukraine, which has seen some of the fiercest fighting in the conflict.

There, they helped to build more than 400 bomb-resistant homes that are also insulated against cold temperatures.

The couple said that many of those they helped were the vulnerable who were left behind to fend for themselves.

"People who could leave have already left. The people who we found on the ground were the elderlies, widows, children with disabilities ... basically people with real needs," said Mr Taslim.

Since Russia's invasion a year ago, Ukraine has seen a mass exodus of civilians fleeing the war, with a United Nations estimate of nearly 6 million internally displaced people.

Mr Taslim, an architect, and Ms Lam worked with local partners to build emergency shelters and homes for affected residents.

Their modular homes are built and furnished from locally sourced material, and each comes fitted with a toilet and kitchen.

ENERGY PROJECT

Beyond putting roofs over people's heads, the couple has two other humanitarian projects in the country.

Ukraine's winter has been made harsher by Russia's intense targeting of its energy grid, which has crippled about half of its power infrastructure, leaving millions without heat or light in winter.

After experiencing the power outages first-hand, the pair began an initiative to transport power generators from neighbouring countries.

Ms Lam Bao Yan and some Ukrainians she has helped. (Photo: Lam Bao Yan)

"We brought generators from other parts of Europe into churches, orphanages, hospitals to power them because they really need (electricity), especially for those who are vulnerable, so they can charge up medical devices and such," said Mr Taslim.

The couple and their partners on the ground set up 80 aid stations across the nation, each equipped with a diesel generator. These premises provide heat, internet, hot food, essential supplies, and mental support for the hundreds who visit each day.

HELPING MOTHERS

Another project the couple has embarked on supports pregnant mothers who are experiencing difficulties, many of whom have lost their husbands and homes in the war.

Some of these expectant mothers they helped were contemplating abortion, Ms Lam said, as "it has been difficult for them to see the hope of carrying on".

A lack of basic needs is the main concern for these women, said the couple.

Hence, the pair and their local partners provide essentials like food, diapers and milk powder, and offer medical and financial support, as well as counselling services for them.

Some modular shelters were also donated to house these women and their families, they said.

For the vulnerable made even more helpless by the conflict, Ms Lam said: "Life is already not easy for them before the war, so they are even more vulnerable now and so we need to help them."

MOVING CLOSER TO THE CONFLICT

The couple initially went to Germany to provide humanitarian help for Ukrainian refugees, but eventually decided to travel closer to the war zone, where the need for aid is more crucial.

"After living with the Ukrainian refugees in Germany for a month, we saw their needs and we saw their plight. And that moved us and compelled us to do more for the people," said Mr Taslim.

From Germany, the pair travelled to Poland before crossing into Ukraine, and have made four trips there so far.

With work on the ground increasing as the war rages on, the duo applied for residence permits in Ukraine, which will make it easier for them to stay longer in the country.

"With us taking so many trips there, I think it makes a lot of sense for us to have residence permits," said Ms Lam.

"This will allow us to be there more on the ground to follow up with the work and to understand the situation and adapt to needs (that may arise)."

The couple had planned to build 500 modular homes by winter last year, but a shortage in supplies and constant power outages have left the pair almost 100 homes short.

However, they plan to get back on track as the weather gets warmer in spring.

"We are on it because everyone needs a home over there right now," said Ms Lam.

Source: CNA/dn(sn)

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