

From international student to refugee

Fleeing Ukraine and resettling elsewhere has been difficult—especially for African nationals.

by [Patrick Egwu](#) in the [October 2022](#) issue



A student covers herself in blanket at the Medyka border crossing in Poland after fleeing from the Ukraine in February. (AP Photo/Visar Kryeziu)

On February 22, Martin Domo was at his home in Kharkiv, Ukraine’s second-largest city, when his friend phoned him and said, “We need to leave.” Tensions had been building between Russia and Ukraine, and a possible invasion was imminent.

“As though he knew what would happen, he told me that we must leave here because a war might likely start,” Domo recalled. “I was confused and didn’t know what to do at that time.”

Two days later, [Russia invaded](#) Ukraine—and the situation became chaotic.

“Malls, banks, and schools were closing, and people were scared and confused about what to do,” Domo said. “I have never seen anything like this before in my life.”

Domo, who immigrated to Ukraine from the Republic of Benin 12 years ago, said he and his friend sheltered in their apartments for two days as Russian bombs and missiles dropped. Everyone was scared and was looking for a way to leave the city to a safer place, he said.

On February 26, the second day of the invasion, Domo and his friend hurriedly packed a small backpack and headed for the train station to go to Kyiv, the nation's capital. Once in Kyiv, they and hundreds of other foreigners who were fleeing the war made plans to go to Poland, which borders Ukraine on the west.

In Kyiv and other parts of the country, [frantic evacuation](#) efforts were ongoing. Thousands of people were getting ready to leave the country for safety. Buses and trains were transporting people to the borders of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, and Moldova.

Domo and his friend secured transportation on a bus headed to Lviv, a Ukrainian city less than 50 miles from the Polish border. But once they were dropped at Lviv, said Domo, there were no other buses going to Poland. So they had to continue on foot "because there was no time to wait."

They trekked for two days to get to the border, but when they got there, Polish border guards would not let them cross. Foreigners like Domo were asked to go back and enlist in the Ukrainian army to help fight the war.

With no food, water, or shelter, Domo and other refugees slept in the open, enduring freezing temperatures. After five days at the border and prolonged arguments with the border guards, Domo and others fleeing the war were finally allowed to enter Polish territory.

Domo's experience is not an isolated one. Thousands of foreigners, mostly from African countries, have shared their bitter experiences of [discrimination](#) at the Ukrainian-Polish border.

Michael Oloja, a Nigerian student who had been studying in Ukraine before the invasion, also fled to Poland. Oloja and his friends walked for three days to get to the border and, like Domo, were denied entry by Polish border guards. He said Ukrainians and refugees from other non-African countries were allowed in while the Africans were pushed back.

“We spent another day in the open without any shelter before they allowed us to enter Poland after we started protesting,” he said.

The war in Ukraine has escalated into one of Europe’s largest refugee and humanitarian crises in recent times. Before the war started, the European Union was already experiencing a refugee crisis, with millions fleeing the wars in the Middle East and political instability across Africa. The ongoing war in Ukraine has exacerbated the refugee problem. Since the war started, more than [14 million](#) people have fled Ukraine, according to the United Nations. The International Organization for Migration said more than [8 million people](#) have been internally displaced within Ukraine.

In Ukraine’s neighboring countries, refugees are housed at reception centers where they are provided with temporary shelter, food, and medical care. Less than two weeks into the war, the European Union activated its [temporary protection directive](#) and said the refugees were entitled to social welfare payments and access to housing, medical treatment, and schools

Such services can be overwhelming for host countries to provide. Poland, which has taken the largest number of refugees, and Moldova, which has taken the largest number per capita, have both asked for international support to help fund their efforts.

Away from their homes and livelihood, Domo and other refugees found themselves living a life they never imagined.

Two days after Domo arrived in Poland, a local parish made arrangements to help those moving on to Germany. He said that every two days a bus would come and take 50 of them across the border to Berlin. Since the war started, Germany alone has registered about [400,000 Ukrainian refugees](#), mostly women and children. Berlin estimates that up to 80,000 Ukrainian refugees are currently residing in the city.

“The situation is precarious, and that’s why we have to step in to help where we can,” said [Orkan](#) Özdemir, a member of the [Berlin House of Deputies](#).

To help their resettlement, the EU has granted Ukrainians the right to stay and work throughout its 27 member nations for up to three years. “What we do is that we move them out of refugee status and put them into standard status so they can live and work here for the next three years,” Özdemir said.

Özdemir said refugees receive social security grants of €400 (\$427) per month, as well as housing and health insurance. Foreigners from third countries who want to go back home are helped with relocation plans.

In April, the German government [announced](#) it would provide €2 billion (\$2.04 billion) to help Ukrainian refugees find jobs and housing, take language courses, and attend school. Ukrainian refugees of African descent, however, say they have had a harder time accessing these benefits than their White counterparts. Domo and his friend said they have yet to receive any kind of stipend.

Europe is a choice destination for education for many young Africans, which is how some of them end up in Ukraine in the first place. Domo, for example, came to Kharkiv five years ago—encouraged by his friends who were already studying in Ukraine—to study computer engineering at the National Technical University.

Özdemir, who is also the Berlin House of Deputies' spokesman for integration and antiracism, said the government is working with lots of Black students from Ukraine. The goal, he said, is to give them three-year visas to allow them to complete their studies in Germany.

“That’s what we are trying to do at this point in time, but we are still negotiating with universities,” he said.

Amid the rallying call for support from around the world, the church has been deeply involved in intervention and humanitarian efforts.

“The church is trying to remain with its people in Ukraine,” said [Alexander Laschuk](#), a Ukrainian Byzantine priest and executive director of the [Metropolitan](#) Andrey Sheptytsky Institute of Eastern Christian Studies at the University of St. Michael’s College in the University of Toronto. “Massive humanitarian projects are currently ongoing through religious organizations.”

There is a large Ukrainian community in Canada, with strong ties to Ukraine. According to [Statistics Canada](#), there are more than 1.3 million people—close to 4 percent of the Canadian population—who report their ethnic origins as Ukrainian. The country also has the highest number of Ukrainian refugees in North America, having welcomed more than 35,000 since the war started. The [government says](#) it has received more than 340,000 visa applications and approved more than 145,000.

Laschuk was on a train to visit a parish in Sarnia, Ontario, when Russia invaded. He said he spent the remaining hour of the ride reaching out to his family.

“I have family who are still in central Ukraine, and you worry about them anytime you hear there is a bombing,” he said. “It’s impacting everyone in every possible way, especially with this horrible decision you have to make. . . . If your husband is of military age and can’t leave because he needs to stay back and fight, what do you do? You just hope for the best, and I think it’s not a decision that any of us would want to have to make.”

Laschuk said the uncertainty of the war has been very stressful. Since the arrival of Ukrainian refugees to Canada in early March, he has been monitoring the [intervention of churches](#) and religious nonprofits across the country in helping them resettle.

“This is an unjust war, and the church is supporting the people in the defense of their home and in seeking to live in peace,” he said. “There is also a great task in rebuilding the country and that’s going to be a massive project.”

In March, the Archdiocese of Toronto launched a [humanitarian relief fund](#) in response to the war. Funds collected by the archdiocese have been distributed to the [Catholic Near East Welfare Association](#) and the archdiocese’s own [office for refugees](#), both of which help relocate and resettle Ukrainian refugees upon their arrival in Canada.

Laschuk said that parishes and community organizations have organized food banks for the refugees. Some schools have enrolled hundreds of Ukrainian children. “This will make it easier for mothers who need to support their families because their husbands are in Ukraine,” Laschuk said.

When the war started, Domo, a Catholic, said he thought about asking God why he allowed it to happen. “When things like this start happening, you start having some personal spiritual reflections,” he said. “I know God loves us and would not want harm to befall us. But situations like this will make you doubt everything.”

Domo is hardly alone. Laschuk said, “This is a time when a lot of people are having a real crisis of faith and doubting every situation.” He added that trying to find God in the midst of this suffering is sometimes a challenge.

“Ukraine is going through its own Golgotha, especially what we are seeing in the horrible massacre of civilians across the country,” he said, adding that some of the dead are known only to God.

“For me, the great presence of God is to see that love in people” who courageously help others, “who don’t have to be doing that but are doing it despite the risks,” he said. “Those incredible moments of selflessness are moments of Christ being with us in these dark moments.”

In addition to financial and military assistance, parishes and Christians across Canada are making efforts to offer [prayers and spiritual support](#) to Ukrainians who are fleeing the war. In May, a parish in downtown Toronto had a day of prayer for the besieged city of Mariupol.

“The world is praying for them,” Laschuk said. “Kyiv has somehow become this great beacon for the world, which is a great thing because when people are praying, that’s when miracles can happen, and I know people are praying everywhere.”

There is currently no end in sight for the war in Ukraine. “It gets worse and worse for some people,” said Laschuk. “We need to keep helping them and not let them suffer alone. There is a need for a solution, and the world can help. The victory in this horrible war requires those people making selfless sacrifices.”

Now in Berlin, Domo is seeking to start a new life. He recently got a job at a warehouse but has no papers to prove his identity because he lost all his documents while fleeing the war.

“My employers said they need me to present any document that would show that I was a student while in Ukraine,” he said. “That is the stage I’m currently in right now. I never imagined that I would ever find myself in this kind of situation.”

Despite his spiritual doubts, Domo tells me his faith is not shaken—because God has been protecting him.

“I still believe in God no matter the situation I find myself in,” he said. “I believe everything is going to be fine. Things may be difficult now, but you just need to believe.”