Helping hand for Ukraine’s Jews

PETER KOHN

FAR from the headlines, elderly and vulnerable Jews still suffering from the 2014 civil unrest in Ukraine are being aided by the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC).

Visiting Australia, Oksana Galkevich, JDC’s Israel-based projects director, field operations, and Amir Shaviv, its New York-based assistant executive vice-president for special operations, are briefing Joint Australia supporters on the organisation’s response to the upheaval in Ukrainian life, and on crisis spots such as Venezuela and Zimbabwe.

Born and raised in Kharkiv, eastern Ukraine, Galkevich aided Ukrainian Jews for 15 years. Her home was in the region where Russia intervened in 2014 to support Ukrainian separatists.

Armed conflict between Ukrainian government forces and the Russian-backed east of the country led to a mass exodus of civilians to western Ukraine.

“Many of those who fled west during the fighting, JDC volunteers in cars and on bikes skirted eastern Ukraine’s shelled public transport system, delivering food and medicine to Jewish elderly or ill, timing their deliveries between shellings, Galkevich said.

“Many of those who fled west thought the crisis would be over by the winter of 2014-15, but when the cold set in, they had new needs,” she said.

School summer camps were used to house homeless Jews, and counsellors from the Israel Trauma Coalition arrived.

With Ukraine’s future still under a cloud, JDC is helping Jews, many on pensions of $US2 per day, find employment, receive food vouchers, and celebrate chagim.

“While many international aid organisations were told to leave when the crisis began, JDC’s Chesed centres are regarded as a Ukrainian network, and did not come under that category,” explained Galkevich.

Amir Shaviv, who has spent 30 years planning JDC relief operations, said aid efforts are now underway in strike-torn Venezuela and Zimbabwe.

“JDC’s proud history of over 100 years, Shaviv said: “We’re here to offer Australian Jews the opportunity to help a state-of-the-art global support community.”

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