



# In the line of fire

Exchanging high finance for aid work has put Aucklander Mike Seawright in the front line of the world's hellholes. **by LAWRENCE WATT**

**W**orking on the front line in increasingly battered Ukraine is no joke – yet still people joke – might just be with a wry smile, though. Mike Seawright, founder and chief executive of New Zealand-based ReliefAid, remembers a Ukrainian man he met in Bucha, whom he asked, “Were any Russian troops in your home?”

“No, the vodka was still there, so I knew

they hadn't visited,” the man replied with a grin.

Seawright has been home in Auckland for a stint, trying to recover from battle fatigue – the emotional fallout from working in war and disaster zones. He admits the aid sector could manage its “casualties” better, including himself. Yet he has just said goodbye to his partner and two teenage children to return to the front line.

He set up ReliefAid nine years ago as an

aid provider specialising in helping people who live near war-zone front lines. Today, Ukraine is its biggest operation. Funded by donors, it has 13 full-time expat staff (including Kiwis) and 40 local volunteers, mostly near the front line. The agency operates in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, which has been hit by both civil war and natural disasters.

Seawright has been shocked by what he has seen in Ukraine. He believes the worst





Mike Seawright outside a near-destroyed house in Kyiv. Despite anti-missile defences, some drones and missile fragments still get through.

atrocities – rapes, mass murder, torture – are committed mostly by second-line troops who follow the main Russian force. The UN Commissioner for Human Rights has documented unlawful killings, including summary executions, of at least 73 civilians in Bucha, a front-line town where ReliefAid operates just 35 minutes northwest of Kyiv.

American defence specialists estimate more than 20,000 Russian soldiers have been killed in Ukraine, many of them mercenaries working for the private Wagner Group army. International media estimate a similar number of Ukrainian soldiers have died. ReliefAid's workers in nearby towns are subject to Russian artillery and rocket attacks, although so far without casualties. The destruction is horrific, even to Seawright, who has seen towns in Syria flattened. Driving through Bucha was to see “complete devastation” for a whole 30 minutes.

Understandably, some people cry when they recount what happened, and while Seawright is heartened by others who keep their spirits up – like the man he met in Bucha – he has come across others who are guided by a mix of disbelief, Russian propaganda and wishful thinking. Some refugees have trouble believing their homes have been destroyed – they don't think Russians could have done that sort of thing, he says.

Wagner leader Yevgeny Prigozhin's shortlived rebellion last month has only added to the danger inside Ukraine, he says, with intensified rocket attacks on civilians. Putin appears to have been weakened by his attack dogs turning on him. But Seawright is concerned that Wagner might attack from Belarus, which would “massively widen the fighting front and once again put at risk the capital, Kyiv”.

### EMOTIONAL TOLL

When he's not working in Ukraine, Seawright, 49, lives in central Auckland with his partner, Joanne, and two teenage children, and runs the organisation remotely, spending hours talking and messaging Syrian or Ukrainian staff via smartphone apps.

There is a personal cost in spending much of his time overseas – his daughters complain about their frequently absent dad, although he notes that's less so now they are teenagers. He confesses he is a “shorter and blunter person” after two decades of aid work. Running, often in the company of border collie Chico, is one way he can decompress. “I started jogging because I was struggling at one point – you must find that thing that keeps you sane.” His real luxury is spearfishing with mates when he has the chance. “There is no war underwater, and I absolutely love the sea.”

But a big start for stressed-out aid workers is just “being able to talk to someone”, so he has set up a counselling service where ReliefAid's English-speaking workers can “debrief, unload and decompress” about the emotional cost of their work to trained counselling specialists based in Aotearoa.

Born in Palmerston North and raised on a small farm near Hastings, Seawright trained as a marine biologist at Victoria University of Wellington, but never worked in that sector. His first “real” jobs were in IT, then merchant banking, in London's bull market in the mid-90s. That career ended abruptly when he and Jo moved to Ireland in 2001 to capitalise on that country's economic miracle, only to find “it was no longer the Celtic Tiger”. He couldn't get the work

he wanted and had to settle for a job at an internet cafe.

Back home with his tail briefly between his legs, Seawright soon got highly paid work with a telco, but was not satisfied with it, so talked his way into his first – and somewhat lower-paid – aid-sector job with GOAL, the Irish aid provider. A GOAL boss rang him from what is now South Sudan and interviewed him on the phone. He'd had “no prior experience in aid work, and no time in Africa, [so] the interview focused on being able to manage large teams, while staying sane.”

The job turned out to be “the hardest place I have ever worked – I have never been as much out of my depth”, he says of his 18 months in Sudan. The experience helped lead to becoming an aid diplomat for NZ Foreign Affairs and Trade (in New

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Zealand, Samoa, and Afghanistan) and many other contracts, including a senior post for Médecins Sans Frontières in Syria. It was there he saw not enough help was in place for families near the front line, and ReliefAid was born – its headquarters then, as now, in the family home office. Joanne does the finances pro bono. “ReliefAid's success is in a large part due to Jo. Without her support, we wouldn't have got off the ground.”

At first, most of the agency's work was in Syria, but just days after Russia attacked Ukraine last year, Seawright changed his flight destination from Iran to Ukraine, where he knew just one person, an American IT specialist who put him in touch with the right people so he could begin setting up the Ukrainian operation. Its mahi includes repair teams and distributing DIY repair kits – items such as tarpaulins, pliers and nails. It also delivers medical supplies to hospitals and blankets and mattresses to those in need.

In Afghanistan, the focus is currently on helping children learn and delivering emergency food kits to displaced families. In Syria, its educators encourage kids to draw, as part of a “bounce back” programme. ReliefAid also distributes lots of food, but a common thread is helping people





to help themselves. “Everywhere we work, people, families and communities are helping each other. We bridge the gap so they can continue to do this.”

Sometimes, Kiwi ingenuity is part of the kit: families in several countries now cook with a small, efficient Escea woodburning stove, made in Dunedin and assembled locally.

To the rest of the world, Seawright says Syria, now in its 12th year of civil war, has effectively “fallen off the map”, and has had almost no support for the earthquake that devastated it and Eastern Turkey. “Huge displacements [arising from the earthquake] have affected people – let alone the damage from the effects of the war.” UN figures show more than 6.8 million Syrians have been forced to flee their country since 2011 and another 6.9 million remain internally displaced. These are the highest refugee numbers since World War II.

Seawright says working in Syria “absolutely scares him”. Western aid workers are targeted by kidnappers, and managing that risk is something governments, as well as small aid agencies, have difficulty with. In 2016, two of his local staff were killed by snipers while installing communications equipment on a roof. The incident was “the

worst time of my professional life”, but it was mixed with inspiration from the local people. “I called a meeting the next day, and said we can’t keep doing this, but the Syrian workers ignored me – they went to the men’s funeral and were back delivering aid the next day.”

Good planning has at least reduced the risk of injury and death. The Syrian Air Force attacks aid trucks, Seawright says. But workers noticed the planes never took off before 10am – he still doesn’t know why. Ever since, aid-truck drivers have had an early start and finish.

In Ukraine, while it’s not apparent aid workers are targeted, the Russian artillery fires regularly at certain roads. Generally, drivers wait until the firing recedes before leaving, taking a calculated risk. Another precaution is avoiding congregating in large groups, which might be fired on. The main danger, he says, is near the front line, where “anyone might get shelled within a 20km range” – while in Kyiv, behind the lines, aid workers might get hit by rockets or drones. If it happens to him, “so be it”, he says.

There is also the threat of nuclear fallout, given Russian President Vladimir Putin’s pledge to move tactical nuclear

1. ReliefAid packages being distributed in northern Syria. 2. Displaced people in northwest Syria. 3. A Ukrainian family in historic Chernihiv. 4. A refugee camp near Idlib, northwest Syria. 5. A Ukrainian woman near Chernihiv.

missiles nearer to Ukraine. Doctors advise Seawright the main precaution for aid workers after a nearby nuclear blast, is taking iodine tablets – but these work only against cancer of the thyroid, not against other cancers. The risk arises from either a tactical nuke exploding or from nuclear fallout from Europe’s largest nuclear plant, Zaporizhzhia, should it leak or melt down if a shell or missile hits a reactor.

**GROWTH & NEUTRALITY**

Only a few aid organisations do this risky front-line work, and given the 1000km front line in Ukraine, Seawright says there is plenty of room for growth.

Although ReliefAid needs to keep growing, the reliance on individual donors – mostly from New Zealand, but also from the US and Canada – rather than government help, is likely to stay, he says. The need to maintain political neutrality in countries such as Ukraine, Syria and Iraq makes it very difficult to accept money from





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any government – including ours, which, he notes, trained Iraqi troops to fight Isis, a group that still appears to operate in Syria. “Government support needs to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.”

Seawright is aware of the limits of his own professional skills, so has recently appointed a board to develop a growth strategy for ReliefAid, which could include partnering with other relief organisations. The chair is former Heinz-Wattie boss David Irving, who established the business incubator Icehouse, and members include Katy Carlson, a law partner in Auckland.

Local volunteers multiply the agency’s workforce. “Although we have paid professional staff, we also work with these incredible volunteer networks who, say, help to unload our trucks.” Among them are people who did not want to “go off and fight and kill people but still wanted to serve their country”, he says. “Women and children may move out of the country – we saw this in Syria, too – but if you are older, you may have nowhere to go, or you may not want to leave your home.”

Seawright explains what life is like for Ukrainians who live near the front line. The power is usually off, so communications are intermittent, and their town is subject

to Russian shelling. “During the winter, it is minus 5°C, there is [virtually] no electricity, no coms, and air-raid sirens go off every day and night.” People live where bombs are “still raining down on them, many already living in damaged houses”.

“You might have, say, a hole in your roof, but you have no work, so you have no physical means of being able to pay to fix it.

“Everywhere you see the same pattern.

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Many Ukrainian businesspeople help – for instance, by providing free warehouses they no longer use. “Their whole businesses have been pulled apart. Wars impoverish whole communities.”

As to the economic cost, Seawright

points to Dnipro, Ukraine’s fourth-largest city, where ReliefAid works. He’s been told unemployment there is 59% and 60% of businesses have shut down. He asks himself how long can the Ukrainian people keep this up – the stress, loss of life and livelihoods, the dreadful living conditions. Yet, he notices most Ukrainians will not give up. So, why does Russia continue to fight?

“They [Russian leaders] know that the longer they fight, the longer the pain [for the Ukrainians],” he says. This is because Russia can keep stoking its war machine with people. He notes only a small percentage of eligible Russian men have been called up so far, and Russian support for the war is much deeper than just Putin and his colleagues.

Despite the embarrassment of the Wagner Group’s rebellion, Seawright is fairly certain Putin’s war has several years to run, given “both Ukraine and Russia are maintaining very hard positions, with little evidence of compromise”.

Aid agencies trying to help the 17.7 million Ukrainians the UN estimates are affected are also in for a long haul.

“Both sides show no signs of slowing up.” ■

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