

Salem family in Ukraine en route to Germany as civilian attacks soar

BY ARDESHIR TABRIZIAN
Of the Salem Reporter

Seven and a half hours after an explosion set off the Johnsons' car alarms and left their kids screaming and crying, they posted one last video before hitting the road.

"Hey everybody, it's six in the morning here in Ukraine on Saturday. We have to go," said Kim Johnson, wiping away tears, in the video sent to their newsletter subscribers. "I never thought I would say those words, but it's just escalating so fast."

Since Kim and her husband Jed Johnson left Salem in 2013, their home has been Ukraine. There they operate homes for children and adults with disabilities through their nonprofit Wide Awake International.

They stayed in their house in a village two hours west of the capital Kyiv for 12 days after Russian troops invaded Ukraine, taking in as many as 60 people who needed a safer place to stay. The Johnsons were determined to stay there until it became too unsafe.

The turning point for them came Saturday morning, Mar. 5, when Kim announced in the video that they would be leaving Ukraine.

"It just seems like we have to get our boys and our kids to safety," she said. "The boys can't choose it for themselves. But they're increasingly afraid, they feel our tension."

The Johnsons are now en route to Germany by way of Romania, driving a car with their six kids and with a caravan taking another 38 people. A few of their team are going by car through Poland to save time and avoid legal hassles with Ukrainian documents.

"It's going to be brutal, but the risks of staying outweigh the risk of going," Jed Johnson wrote in an email Friday.

More than 1.5 million people have fled Ukraine for neighboring countries since Russia's invasion, as more than 300 civilians were killed, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner For Human Rights said in a statement Sunday, Mar. 6.

An adviser to Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky, said Monday that 202 schools, 34 hospitals and more than 1,500 residential buildings had been destroyed, with nearly 1,000 towns and villages rid of electricity, water and heat, according to reporting from the *New York Times*.

The family left Saturday and plans on all

meeting Tuesday in Kaufbeuren, a town of about 44,000 in Bavaria.

A few on of their staff will stay at the "Homestead," the land the Johnsons bought to operate three homes, with the families who wouldn't leave Ukraine. Some told them they were born in Ukraine, and they were going to die in Ukraine.

The staff who stay will continue providing humanitarian aid to people who can't or won't go. "A lot of people don't have the option, so

I'm not taking it for granted but I'm just so sad. (We) just worked so hard to make this a place of peace," Kim Johnson said in the video, holding back tears.

After they decided to leave, one of their daughters told her she was just realizing their lives were never going to be the same.

"This is the best place in the world. If you've been here, you know it," Johnson said. I hear that around me, I see that around me. My poor Ukraine."



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