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## Mykolaiv. The parish priest: "We smell fire and the city is shrouded in black smoke. Help us stop the Russians"

It's a war of fire and smoke. The Russians' plan is to burn down and destroy everything. "Yesterday morning ( June 22, *Ed.'s note*) Mykolaiv and the city's inhabitants were woken up by terrible explosions. We have no definite information regarding casualties. As we speak, we can smell the fire. We see black smoke and destruction in the city caused by the attacks. We eventually learned that Russia launched seven missile strikes on Mykolaiv. One hit and destroyed a large public building." Father **Taras Pavlius** speaks to SIR from Mykolaiv. He describes what is happening in one of the war-torn regions at this time. He serves as parish priest at the "Protection of the Holy Virgin Mary" parish church in Mykolaiv and also serves as parish priest at the Holy Trinity church in the village of Shevchenkove. There, the priest explains, the situation is even worse because the village - though not occupied by the Russians - is under constant Russian attack. Father Taras only speaks Ukrainian, his words are translated via whatsapp from Kiev by another priest. "I cannot reveal my exact location for safety reasons," he says as if apologising. "All I can say is that I have stayed in the city since the outbreak of the war, carrying out my pastoral ministry, as well as social services through Caritas. The Church has remained and its doors are open to everyone. It did not abandon its people. Religious services are celebrated as before, and its relief centre run by volunteers provides humanitarian aid to the population. Many people ask me why we did not leave. And sometimes it's hard to give an answer to that question. I am here to serve the people, to help our soldiers. Who else can do this but us?". **Almost 600,000 people lived in Mykolaiv before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, according to official figures. No accurate data are available, but there are believed to be 200,000 people left in the city.** The biggest emergency - right from the start - was and still is the lack of access to clean drinking water. According to the parish priest, on April 10, or a few days before - i.e. in the first weeks of the Russian attack on Ukraine - the city's water supply was bombed and destroyed by the Russians. Since then, it could neither be fixed nor repaired. It was thus decided to collect water from the Dnipro River, which is the largest river in Ukraine. But it turned out that it was not possible. People had access to clean drinking water for more than a month and a half, until the first days of June, thanks to volunteer workers that brought it into the city. However, the water supply was meagre, just enough for survival. They then attempted to fix the water pipeline system using water from another river. They succeeded, but being close to the sea, the water finally flowing into the town's water system is salty, tastes bad and is of low quality. It's not safe to drink under any circumstance and is only used for cleaning or cooking. Drinking water is hence still being supplied by volunteer workers. Fortunately - says the parish priest - there are no reported cases of epidemics yet and "we hope that there will be none in the future". But food is available. Shops are open because, fortunately, transport services to the neighbouring city of Odessa are still running. "However, while food can be bought, people have no money," says Father Taras. "Everyone here lost their jobs. And people struggle to buy food. So they come to our relief centres for food supplies, provided by humanitarian organisations." **Mikoailv is fighting and resisting. "The city has not been occupied by the Russian, thanks to the city's political authorities and the military,"** says the priest. "Our soldiers are liberating the entire Oblast. Now they are slowly moving towards the occupied town of Kherson." The fighting is ongoing and the Russian artillery occasionally reaches the city of Mykolayiv. "That's why from time to time we are hit by shelling. But thanks to the courage of the Ukrainian military forces the city is holding out, and the province is being liberated, forcing the Russians to retreat." The town of Mykolaiv is known to everyone as the southern stronghold. Should the city succumb, the Russians would reach Odessa, and the whole southern region bordering the Black Sea would be taken over by the Russians. Much too great a loss. "We know that Europe is watching us", says the priest. "We are aware that Europe's eyes are fixed on the city of Mykolaiv, which is resisting. But watching is not enough. It is also necessary to pray, to help and to cry out loud that Ukraine and

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especially Mykolaiv are under attack, that the Russians are also killing children, that they stop at nothing, that they are destroying everything. We are grateful that you are attentively following our plight, but please ask Russia to stop." A final message from Mykolaiv: "I wish to thank you for your concern, for your interest in our city, for what you are reporting. You have to tell the truth, you have to recount what is happening in Ukraine right now. Please pray for us and help us."

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