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to the OSCE

Délégation du Canada
auprès de l'OSCE

**STATEMENT BY FIRST SECRETARY RICK STEENWEG
ON THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION'S ONGOING AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE
1411th MEETING OF THE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

16 February 2023

Mr. Chair,

Next week we commemorate one year since Russia launched its brutal pre-meditated invasion against Ukraine. But Russia's aggression began in February 2014, 8 years earlier, when it occupied Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and the Autonomous City of Sevastopol. During these nine long years, Crimeans have suffered tremendously. Many went through filtration to test their allegiance. Others have seen their friends murdered or their families tortured. Their freedom of speech has been curtailed and many have been arbitrarily detained and imprisoned. Tatar activists and others have gone missing.

Lamentably, we are seeing similar depravity in more recently occupied areas. In Bucha and Irpin, overwhelming evidence of Russian war crimes has been uncovered, including shocking evidence of raped and murdered civilians. In Kherson, more torture chambers were discovered which were used for months to both physically and psychologically abuse residents. In Mariupol, where only a quarter of the pre-war population remains, mobile crematoria were deployed to clean up the bodies from Russia's devastating bombing.

In occupied Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk, Luhansk, and Crimea, teachers are forced to teach only in Russian, and follow Russian curricula focused on Russian history. The population is forced to adopt Russian passports. Children are taken and placed for adoption by families in Russia. Ukrainian public art is erased, and monuments destroyed. All in an effort to erase the Ukrainian identity and destroy the Ukrainian nation. Reminiscent of Stalin's subjugation of the population in Soviet times, secret police attend markets and other public gatherings to eavesdrop on conversations and, evocative of the Holodomor, people lack basic needs. Soup kitchen line-ups are long and expired stew is served to those in need, despite it having a "rotten smell and a rotten taste." This week, Russian journalist Maria Ponomarenko was sentenced to six years in prison for reporting on the destruction of Mariupol's central theater, targeted even though the theater was clearly marked as a place sheltering children – with markings visible from the air. For telling the truth, Maria was convicted of "spreading fake news about the military." There is no such thing as freedom of speech in these occupied areas. Only fear and propaganda.

We learn about the situation in the occupied areas from those journalists not afraid to speak the truth, the findings of UN agencies and OSCE institutions, and, indirectly, through the lived accounts from thousands of Ukrainians, like Mr. Madin who spoke about his horrific experiences at the hands of his captors on Tuesday in the room above us. And what is the motive to cause so much pain and suffering, he and others describe? This can't be due to the cruelty of individual Russian soldiers alone. It is too systematic and too clear in its intent. They are acting on explicit orders from above. Putin's regime believes that by attempting to erase Ukrainian institutions, language, and history in the areas they occupy, they can falsely claim sovereignty over these lands. Through the 'russification' of the population, they believe civilians will forget who they are. Unfortunately for Mr. Putin, the international community has not forgotten his 'little green men' who appeared out of nowhere to perform his bidding in Crimea. We will not forget the crimes carried out against innocent Ukrainians. And we will not forget that Crimea is Ukraine.

The Ukrainian population continues to demonstrate commendable resistance and resilience in response to Russian repression. They continue to defy Russia's occupation by hanging yellow ribbons, attending demonstrations, and carrying out individual acts of civil disobedience. Canada will continue to support Ukraine for as long as it takes.

Mr. Chair,

On February 24th, next week, Canada will continue to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the Ukrainian people, to strongly condemn the Kremlin's brutal actions, and to use every tool at our disposal to hold Russia accountable. We reiterate our call upon Russia to end this war of aggression and to withdraw all troops and military equipment from Ukraine's internationally recognized territory. We call on Russia to release all SMM staff, to promptly return SMM assets to the OSCE, and to abide by the principles and commitments it has signed on to.

Thank you.