Russian forces are increasingly targeting Ukrainian healthcare facilities, says WHO

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Sixty four healthcare facilities have been attacked by the Russian military since it launched an invasion of Ukraine a month ago, the World Health Organization has said.

The attacks violate international law and have become increasingly common since Russian forces began intensifying their bombardment of Ukrainian towns and cities in recent weeks.

In the first 13 days of the war in Ukraine, which began on 24 February, WHO verified 16 attacks on healthcare centres, and in the following 13 days it confirmed an additional 48 attacks. Two to three healthcare facilities on average are being hit each day, and 15 deaths and 37 injuries have resulted so far in these attacks, it said.

Most of the attacks on Ukrainian healthcare facilities are being made with heavy weaponry. A Russian air strike on 9 March that hit a maternity hospital in Mariupol, a city under siege in southeastern Ukraine, left at least three people dead and 17 injured.

Ambulances and medical staff are also being targeted, and hospitals have been converted into military strongholds. The destruction of health infrastructure and chains of medical supplies is preventing treatment of patients with chronic conditions or with trauma injuries caused by the conflict, said WHO’s representative in Ukraine, Jarno Habicht, who called for an immediate halt to the attacks.

“Attacks on healthcare are a violation of international humanitarian law, but a disturbingly common tactic of war—they destroy critical infrastructure, but worse, they destroy hope,” said Habicht. “They deprive already vulnerable people of care that is often the difference between life and death. Healthcare is not, and should never be, a target.”

The scale of the healthcare crisis is stretching medical response teams and supplies on the ground. Some 18 million people have been affected by the conflict so far, with seven million Ukrainians internally displaced and almost four million having fled to neighbouring countries.

Supply pipeline

To respond to the growing crisis WHO has opened an operations hub in neighbouring Poland and developed a pipeline of trauma supplies to most Ukrainian cities. It has dispatched more than 100 metric tonnes of medical equipment over the border to health facilities throughout Ukraine, and 36 tonnes are on their way to Lviv in the west of the country.

An additional 108 metric tonnes of supplies are to come, said WHO, for treating physical trauma and chronic diseases along with paediatric drugs and blood transfusion supplies.

Although WHO has established supply lines from its warehouse in Lviv to many other cities in Ukraine, access to many parts of the country remains blocked. A humanitarian convoy designated for Mariupol was not dispatched owing to security concerns, and its operations are restricted by cash flow. Only $9.6m (€7.3m; £8.7m) of an appeal for $57.5m has been donated so far, says WHO.

The destruction of Ukraine’s healthcare infrastructure is making it harder to respond to health emergencies, said senior WHO officials. They estimate that half of Ukraine’s pharmacies are closed, with many health workers having been displaced.

Around 1000 health facilities are also near conflict lines or in changed areas of control, meaning that they have little or no access to medicines, facilities, or health professionals. Treatment of chronic conditions has largely been suspended, and covid-19 vaccination nationwide has all but halted as a result.

Disease and hunger

“The humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate in many parts of the country, and is critical in the Mariupol and Bucha districts,” said WHO’s director general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, on 23 March. “Displacement, poor shelter, and overcrowded living conditions caused by the conflict are also increasing the risk of diseases such as measles, pneumonia, and polio, as well as covid-19.”

WHO has sent more than 20 emergency medical teams to Ukraine, Poland, and the Republic of Moldova to provide training and specialised medical care to bolster existing services.

The secretary general of the UN, António Guterres, warned on 22 March that the war in Ukraine was “threatening to spiral into a global hunger crisis.” The UN predicts that shortages of Ukrainian wheat will cause “catastrophic hunger” in Middle Eastern countries that rely on the food imports.

Tarik Jašarević, WHO spokesperson in Dnipro, eastern Ukraine, said, “The only real solution to the humanitarian and health crisis in Ukraine is peace. Protracted conflict is in nobody’s interest and will only prolong the suffering of the most vulnerable. We continue to call on the Russian Federation to stop the war.”

1 Iacobucci G. Ukraine invasion. 16 health facilities have been attacked, WHO confirms. BMJ 2022;376:o610. https://www.bmj.com/content/376/bmj.o610

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