

Conflict in Ukraine undermines an already challenged health system



The invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February, 2022 looks set to create another 21st-century humanitarian disaster, joining the protracted conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Afghanistan, and Darfur, Sudan. Over the coming weeks millions of people will be displaced both internally and to neighbouring countries. The international community must provide far more humanitarian support, including medical evacuations all over Europe, immediate visas, appropriate care and support for displaced populations, and increased financial assistance to host countries.

The current conflict did not start in February, 2022, but has been developing since 2014, when the Russian Government annexed Crimea, and funded and facilitated opponents of the pro-western Euromaidan movement elsewhere.¹ The Russian support of the separatists in the east of Ukraine, the Donbas, has led to the deaths of an estimated 3400 civilians, 4400 Ukrainian armed forces, and 6500 armed group members since 2014.² Thousands of civilians and combatants were left with serious injuries as result of this wider response to the peaceful Euromaidan protests and the ensuing low-intensity conflict in the Donbas.² Despite the deaths during Euromaidan and in the Donbas conflict,³ the political situation within Ukraine quickly fell off government and media radars in Europe and the USA. Now as the humanitarian health disaster is worsening in Ukraine, the impacts of the conflict unfold in the context of an already challenged health system.

The protracted conflict in the Donbas created considerable humanitarian and health-care needs, with the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating pressures on health-care staff, supplies, and the overall system.⁴ As with other ongoing conflicts such as in Syria and Libya, health-system stabilisation and the humanitarian health response have been chronically underfunded.^{5,6} Shortly before the Russian invasion, an estimated 1.5 million people already required emergency health assistance in Ukraine.⁴ Almost a third of those in need are aged 60 years or older, many with chronic conditions.⁴ The fourth wave of COVID-19, which peaked only weeks before the start of the Russian invasion, exacerbated the situation, due to SARS-CoV-2 infections among health staff and increased hospital occupancy rates.^{4,5}

Before the Russian invasion routine health-care services were already under pressure in the Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts on both sides of the line of contact (LOC) between the Ukrainian Government-controlled areas (GCA) and the non-government-controlled areas (NGCA), under the control of the separatists. These services are now at one of the conflict front lines. Since independence in 1991, Ukraine's health-care system had struggled due to fragmentation, underfunding, and understaffing, as well as mismanagement in some settings.^{7,8} A comprehensive reform programme was initiated in 2014 to mitigate these issues,⁹ but implementation has been more difficult in the east of Ukraine, hampered by the continuing conflict. Before the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine, 76% of households in the GCA of the Donbas within 20 km of the LOC reported that they struggled to access health care.⁴ Recent investments in improving medical facilities will probably be reversed by the current war. One locality where recent improvements had been made to medical services at the Exit-Entry Check Point, Shchastia, in Luhansk oblast, has reportedly been severely damaged in the intensifying conflict.^{4,10} A third of the estimated 600 primary health-care facilities in the GCA and in the NGCA near the LOC were damaged during the Donbas conflict.¹¹ Nearly 40% of residents of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts have experienced trauma, contributing

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to mental health issues.⁴ In the widening conflict, Ukraine's other more established health-care facilities, especially major hospitals, are likely to see equipment and infrastructure become damaged or destroyed. Health-care professionals will become refugees or move to the front lines, where many will be exposed to injury and death. The combined impact risks setting Ukraine's health-care system back decades. Health care in Ukraine must be supported during the conflict with targeted training, funding, and supplies, such as medical oxygen, personal protective equipment, anaesthetics, and surgical supplies.¹² Patients deserve safe health-care settings, a medical-humanitarian system that can assist them unencumbered by risk of violence, and secure evacuation and transportation, when needed.

Health and medical facilities have become politicised in conflicts during the 21st century.¹³ Respect for international humanitarian law is almost non-existent in many conflict zones, with health-care facilities and staff readily targeted. Since 2014, attacks on health-care facilities and medical transport during the conflict in Ukraine have involved direct shelling, occupation of facilities by combatants, and shelling of commuting routes affecting the movement of staff.^{8,14-16} The International Committee of the Red Cross, the UN, and the international community seemed largely powerless to prevent these past attacks on health care in Ukraine and elsewhere.¹³ Now, with the escalation of violence in Ukraine, there are concerning reports of attacks on health care,¹⁷ such as the devastating attack on a maternity and children's hospital in Mariupol on March 9, 2022.¹⁸ WHO has stated such attacks are on the rise, after already verifying at least 18 attacks, targeting a wide range of facilities throughout the country.¹⁹ These attacks are likely to rapidly increase, especially as Ukrainian resistance is met with Russian forces escalating the severity of their attacks and tactics.

The realpolitik is that diplomatic options to immediately stop the conflict in Ukraine are limited. Russian President Vladimir Putin is set on a course for brutal change in Ukraine and appears unwilling to stop until his objectives are achieved. Infringements on the medical sector should be denounced in the strongest terms. Accountability needs to be increased, including by implementing the actions of UN Security Council Resolution 2286 set out to protect health care in conflict.¹³ International humanitarian law must

be invigorated to reflect the realities of conflicts in the 21st century, exploring more effective routes to bring perpetrators to account,²⁰ and motivating better compliance to the laws that benefit us all.

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