Health-care facilities in the firing line – the unacceptable reality of the war in Ukraine

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One of the largest hospitals in eastern Ukraine, providing specialized medical care to a population of 103 000 people, was used to dealing with the consequences of conflict even before the Russian military offensive began on 24 February 2022. Since 2014, the hospital had been playing a crucial role in treating wounded soldiers from the armed struggle in the nearby Donbas region, as well as caring for the 51 000 civilians displaced by the hostilities.

But now, this hospital is out of use.

“The hospital was critical for the entire area, because there was a resuscitation unit here and all the medical equipment needed to care for the civilian population, as well as the surgery and emergency facilities required for treating casualties of the conflict,” said Viktor, the head of the hospital.

In 2019, WHO installed an oxygen generator at the hospital to make sure there was no disruption to the life-saving care being provided to patients, and also donated equipment for washing and sterilizing medical devices.

Andriy, one of the hospital’s health-care workers, recalls the terrifying days following 24 February: “Intensive shelling and attacks on the city began the next day, February 25, and lasted for 10 days. Almost immediately our hospital received an influx of wounded people and we had to set up a bomb shelter in the hospital basement to protect the hundreds of civilians seeking refuge. Most patients and health-care workers were only evacuated from the hospital once the situation had got so bad that we were unable to continue providing medical care.”

After a week and a half of bombardment, the hospital was not just out of action, but so severely damaged that any chance of restarting

services was impossible.

As of 6 April, WHO had verified 91 reports of attacks on health care in Ukraine, causing 73 deaths and 46 injuries. This is unacceptable.

Attacks on health MUST stop. Not only do they endanger lives, they deprive people of urgently needed care and break already-strained health systems.

Health systems, facilities and health workers should never be targets. They must remain protected, functional, safe and accessible to all who need essential medical services. In any conflict, attacks on health care are a violation of international humanitarian law.

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