Health must be at the centre of Ukraine's recovery, says WHO Regional Director for Europe

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This week, WHO Regional Director for Europe Dr Hans Henri P. Kluge led a delegation to Ukraine to review immediate and long-term health needs, the WHO emergency response, and the best ways to help the health system withstand and recover from the damage inflicted by war.

"We must put health at the heart of Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction efforts. Health is not everything, but without health there is nothing," emphasized Dr Kluge as he ended his 5-day visit.

"Even as we try to meet Ukraine's urgent health needs today, we are also looking ahead to the future, and how we can help Ukraine's health system build back smarter, stronger and greener. The health system faces a challenging road ahead to recover and rebuild. WHO is with Ukraine every step of the way."

This was Dr Kluge's third visit to Ukraine this year, and the second since the war began on 24 February. During the visit, Dr Kluge met with senior health and government leaders including Ukraine's First Lady, the Prime Minister, the Minister of Health and the United Nations Resident Coordinator, as well as representatives of Ukraine's Parliament, National Security and Defense Council, and National Council for Restoration. Dr Kluge also held a roundtable discussion with civil society and nongovernmental organizations.

"I am back in Ukraine to discuss the current health situation and ways to support the health system to recover from the consequences of the war, to meet WHO staff, and to offer my full support to health workers and the Ministry of Health of Ukraine," said the Regional Director.

Roughly 300 health facilities are in conflict areas, and 1000 are in changed areas of control, which leaves the health system vulnerable to infrastructural damage and severe disruptions in critical services.

Access to medicines, health facilities and health-care workers is limited or nonexistent in some areas. Nearly 50% of Ukraine's pharmacies are presumed to be closed. Many health workers are either displaced or unable to work, but many continue to provide services wherever they are.

WHO has already begun working on strategies for supporting the health system to recover and bring much-needed health-care services back to the people.

Dr Jarno Habicht, WHO Representative and the Head of the WHO Country Office in Ukraine, noted, "WHO is looking not only to provide humanitarian health support to Ukraine, but also to link this to sustaining essential health services while at the same time supporting the Government to rehabilitate and recover health services, building a more robust and resilient health system that can better serve the health needs of Ukrainians."

During his visit, Dr Kluge joined Minister of Health Viktor Liashko in meetings with frontline health workers in the Chernihiv region, which suffered heavy damage during hostilities and continues to come under attack. Health workers continue to care for the sick, regardless of the bombardment, amidst pockmarked walls and broken windows.

"I have been heartbroken yet inspired by the stories I heard in Chernihiv. This area saw intense fighting at the start of the war and many health facilities were damaged or destroyed. And still, sporadic shelling is happening. And I'm so disheartened as a medical doctor myself to hear the doctors telling me how the health-care facilities, all of them, have been touched by heavy fire. But health workers did the impossible. They survived and saved lives. True heroes," expressed Dr Kluge.

As of today, WHO has verified 236 attacks on health care in Ukraine. Since the beginning of the Russian invasion in Ukraine, WHO has been consistently calling for the protection and safety of health facilities and health workers. Health care must always be protected, especially in armed conflicts, to ensure access to health services for Ukrainians.

One of the delegation's priority issues was mental health services, which are essential for the health response and recovery. Dr Kluge and Dr Habicht met with First Lady Olena Zelenska to discuss WHO's

role in providing expertise to set up a national mental health programme. First Lady Zelenska suggested that World Mental Health Day, which is celebrated in October, should be dedicated to mental health in wartime.

Dr Kluge agreed to provide WHO expertise to support mental health and offered WHO assistance to organize a meeting between First Lady Zelenska and Queen Mathilde of Belgium, who is an active United Nations ambassador for mental health.

Today, 42 million Ukrainian people are experiencing enormous stress and uncertainty. Many have witnessed violence, and over 10 million have been forcibly displaced. Over 16 000 people with moderate to severe mental health conditions face shortages of essential medicines.

WHO has delivered over 480 tonnes of supplies to the humanitarian response in Ukraine. This includes 195 tonnes of critical and lifesaving supplies that have been distributed to oblasts, mostly in the east, south and north of the country, where the need is greatest.

WHO has also been working to equip and train frontline health responders, running biweekly training sessions attended by thousands of Ukrainian health-care providers on how to handle mass casualties.

“We are working on 3 levels of WHO – our country, regional and global levels – to continue to scale up our response in Ukraine to meet the vast needs of people suffering from the war,” explained Dr Habicht.

From the very beginning of the war, WHO has restructured its work and scaled up operations to help the most vulnerable and provide health-care services where they are most needed. WHO has:

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