

In solidarity with the health workers of Ukraine this World Health Day



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I am speaking to you today from the city of L'viv in western Ukraine, from where WHO is coordinating its activities within the country.

Today is World Health Day, the day on which the World Health Organization was founded 74 years ago in the aftermath of the Second World War, to uphold the principle that health is a human right, and all people should enjoy the highest standard of health.

As a doctor myself, I am here in Ukraine to stand in solidarity with the health-care workers in the country. I thank them for their dedication and professionalism – as they continue to deliver care in the face of unimaginable human suffering and in scenes of total devastation – that no nurse, doctor, midwife, ambulance driver, pharmacist, therapist or social worker should ever have to experience.

This visit provides me with a unique opportunity to talk to frontline health workers, patients, local and national authorities, and gather insights on the immediate and longer-term health needs in the country, and to find the best ways for WHO and its partners to deliver assistance.

On this World Health Day, I reiterate WHO's determination to provide health for all – wherever they are across the 53 countries of the WHO European Region. We seek to ensure that everyone, in whatever circumstances, will not be deprived of the medicines, treatment and care they may need. I stand with our Director-General, who on behalf of WHO has consistently called on the Russian Federation for a humanitarian ceasefire immediately, which includes unhindered access to humanitarian assistance for those in need.

In the current situation, WHO's overarching goal is to ensure that people have sustained access to essential health care, and that we

can respond to changing health needs due to the war.

Our activities are based around three priorities:

Firstly, to keep health services operational in Ukraine. Even before 24 February, we were prepositioning supplies, and since then we have been working closely with national and local authorities and more than 80 partners to maintain services across the country.

We have delivered over 185 tonnes of medical supplies to the hardest hit areas of the country, reaching half a million people with materials to support trauma, surgery and primary health care. Last week, we were able to bring in supplies to the encircled city of Sumy. A further 125 tonnes of essential items are also on their way. Assistive products – wheelchairs, other mobility aids, and communication aids for the blind – are in transit, and will be distributed across Ukraine soon.

An estimated 260 000 people are living with HIV in Ukraine. Just this week, together with the United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), Ukrainian authorities and partners, we have made sure that the supply of antiretroviral drugs to cover the needs of every person known to be living with HIV in Ukraine will be met for the next 12 months.

We have a fully functional office in L'viv, and are setting up an operational base in Dnipro, in east-central Ukraine, to mobilize resources more quickly and reach some of the most vulnerable people in conflict zones with urgent supplies.

Given the uncertainties of the current situation, there are no assurances that the war will not get worse. WHO is considering all scenarios and making contingencies for different situations that could afflict the people of Ukraine, from continued mass casualties to chemical assaults.

Our second priority is to work with Ukraine's neighbours, with countries across the entire European Region and beyond, to ensure that the health needs of those fleeing the war are met, treatment and care for refugees with special needs are maintained, and that the health systems of host countries can manage these large influxes of people.

So far, more than 4.2 million people have fled Ukraine since 24

February. I thank the destination countries across the Region for their commitment to extending health services to those arriving, but acknowledge that providing this is challenging and stretching already over-burdened systems. We are working with national authorities to bridge gaps and help deliver supplies where needed, for services such as routine child immunization.

WHO is also coordinating with the European Union to triage patients arriving, to make sure that they are received in an EU country that is best placed to treat them.

We are channelling support from further afield. The Asia-Europe Foundation has provided US\$ 9.5 million from Japan to procure much needed equipment and provide services to manage COVID-19, as well as other communicable diseases including measles and polio – for Ukraine and its neighbours.

Thirdly, we are supporting the Ministry of Health to build back better Ukraine's health system. WHO has had a presence on the ground in Ukraine since 1994, supporting the country to strengthen its health system, especially primary health care and health financing.

Since 2015, and until 24 February this year, the Government of Ukraine had been in the process of reforming the entire health system, moving towards universal health coverage.

The country had been making excellent progress on specific challenges – turning the corner in its fight against TB [tuberculosis] and HIV. It was a beacon of best practice in eastern Europe, with TB incidence falling by almost half in the past 15 years, thanks to investment in modern diagnostic technologies to rapidly identify TB infection, and effective treatment regimens for MDR-TB [multidrug-resistant tuberculosis].

Despite the war, we are determined to support Ukraine and not to lose this momentum.

WHO is preparing to redeploy teams throughout the country as access and security improves. We are committed to work using a strong decentralized footprint, both during the current humanitarian response, but also to be there with local and national authorities to rebuild the war-torn health system.

Health requires peace, well-being requires hope, and healing requires time.

I speak on behalf of the entire WHO family when I say that it is my deepest wish that this war comes to an end swiftly, without further loss of life. Tragically, this is not the reality we see.

As of today, WHO has verified 91 attacks on health; routine immunization coverage for polio and measles is below the threshold for population immunity; 50% of Ukraine's pharmacies are presumed closed; and 1000 health facilities are in proximity to conflict areas or in changed areas of control. Roughly 80 000 babies will be born over the next 3 months with insufficient pre-and post-natal care available due to the ongoing conflict.

In these dark days, let me reassure you that WHO is committed to being in Ukraine in the short and longer term – addressing immediate health challenges, and future reconstruction needs. I would like once again to express my deep admiration for all frontline workers in Ukraine, protecting people's health.

Our mandate and humanitarian principles call on us to ensure health for all – including the poor and most vulnerable – wherever they may be.

We have prepared for different eventualities, anticipating that health challenges will get worse before they get better.

But as WHO's long history and experience shows, they will eventually get better.

The life-saving medicine Ukraine needs right now is peace.

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