

Opening remarks at the Special Session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe



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BY [WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION](#)

Good morning and thank you for joining this special session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe.

These are dark times for the European Region, as we are confronted with unthinkable levels of human suffering. In the long shadow cast from over two years of a pandemic, we are now experiencing war and the greatest humanitarian crisis our European countries have experienced for more than 70 years.

The direct impact of the conflict after two months is appalling: at least 3,382 civilian deaths of which 75 are girls, 91 boys and 69 are children whose sex is yet unknown, 13 million people have been displaced and 16 million people are in need of assistance. When I was in Kyiv in January this year, we were scaling up with the Ministry of Health our joint response to the unprecedented outbreak of vaccine derived polio, rolling out COVID-19 vaccine programmes and attending 2000 severe COVID-19 patients in its hospitals, whilst making fast progress on primary health care and financing reforms under Minister Liashko's inspiring leadership. And as we speak, the few hospitals still functioning, are attending life-threatening burn, bullet and shrapnel injuries, while many other people are unattended at home or in the streets with these injuries, or with tuberculosis, depression and psychiatric disorders, diabetes, HIV, COVID, and cancer. 40% of households have at least one member in need of chronic treatment that they can no longer find, resulting in estimates of at least 3000 premature, avoidable deaths.

With 200 health attacks verified and documented by WHO on the ground, Ukraine is seeing the largest and quickest assault on a health care system, its workforce and its patients. Beyond everything that has been said already, beyond the firmest condemnation of these acts, I need to say that nothing is more destructive to health than

attacking it upfront. A hospital destroyed by an earthquake will be rebuilt and retrofitted with hope; a hospital bombed by the will of someone will be forever lost, marked with stigma and infamy, and feared by the public. It is a breach of international humanitarian law.

We will also see the long-term health impacts of the war unfold. Missed vaccinations for children, treatment gaps for cancer and chronic conditions, shortages of essential medicines, food insecurity, economic uncertainty, psychological trauma, increased sexual and gender-based violence, health workforce burnout – the effects of this conflict will cascade down through generations to come.

I stand firmly beside UN Secretary-General Guterres in urging all parties to enact an urgent and immediate humanitarian ceasefire, which will enable the safe and secure functioning of humanitarian corridors, help evacuate civilian residents and also deliver life-saving humanitarian and medical assistance. And with the UN Secretary-General, I also believe that health and humanitarian principles remain key drivers of peace, and that WHO holds a unique position as a peaceful arbitrator for health, representing the interests of all people in all Member States. Good health comes with unity within and across borders.

As a medical doctor myself, I felt compelled to be in Ukraine again on World Health Day in April, to stand in solidarity with the health-care workers in the country. I thanked them for their dedication and professionalism – as they continue to deliver care in the face of human suffering and in scenes of total devastation – that nurses, doctors, midwives, ambulance drivers, pharmacists, therapists or social workers through commitment to their profession are forced to witness and experience. I was very moved by the dedication, passion and resilience of them all, battling to deliver healthcare. I was equally overwhelmed when I visited war-affected areas in the early days and met with internally displaced migrants and refugees, in Poland, Moldova and the Czech Republic. The President of Moldova asked me to step up our support to the country that had received a disproportionately large number of Ukrainian people, and who were welcomed with open hearts as in other European countries.

Right now, our team is on the ground serving the health needs of evacuated people from Mariupol and, on Saturday, I'll be joining the team in Ukraine, when I travel to Kyiv and war-affected areas that

could not be visited earlier to meet people, patients and front-line workers, to further adapt and scale-up our response, and to agree with the national and local authorities and nongovernmental organizations on how WHO can support the recovery plans to build back better. NGOs have a capital role in health in Ukraine and I respect them a lot, having worked myself with Médecins sans Frontières during 2 wars.

WHO is committed to being in Ukraine both now and in the longer term – addressing immediate health challenges and supporting the future reconstruction of the health system. Together with national authorities and over 100 local, national, regional and global partners we are working night and day to respond to the immediate health needs of every single person affected by this humanitarian emergency – in Ukraine and in countries welcoming those fleeing the fighting. We are now redeploying our teams throughout the country as access and security improves.

As is stated in our WHO constitution “The health of all peoples is fundamental to the attainment of peace and security and is dependent upon the fullest co-operation of individuals and States.”

I am sure that all of us gathered here today, as people and professionals who have dedicated our careers to protect and promote the health of the people we serve, and who respect the sanctity of human life, are deeply concerned about the repercussions of the war in Ukraine to the whole Region.

Health and humanitarian principles, coupled with a pan-European unity and spirit, remain – as I said - key drivers of peace. Today we need pan-European unity now more than ever in line with the motto of the WHO European Programme of Work “United Action for Better Health”. We believe that progress can and must still be made through engaging in constructive dialogue, and I commit to you that especially in these dark times no one will be left behind.

It is with these principles in mind that I call on all of us to approach the debate today.

We owe that to every child, every woman and every man that we serve.

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