

Running a hospital while your country is under attack – a story from western Ukraine



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For patients at Novovolynsk Hospital in western Ukraine, the sound of air raid sirens has suddenly become a common reality amid the military offensive in the country. Patients must move from a modern facility above ground to a 1950s-era underground bomb shelter with a rudimentary set-up that can fit up to 300 people.

“In one day, the air raid sirens went off at 5 separate times. Our patients are mostly the elderly and some are on crutches and facing acute health needs. They cannot keep travelling down to the bunker,” says Mr Oleh Shypelyk, Head of the Hospital.

The Hospital is equipped with 3 operating rooms. An emergency department provides regular medical care and 6 teams tend to the wounded. Each hospital building is equipped with a generator to ensure a continuous supply of electricity.

Health workers are preparing for a range of scenarios should the Hospital become a target in the military offensive. “The main needs are additional generators to ensure electricity supply to the ward with COVID-19 patients – they should stay separate from others – and to the maternity hospital, as women have to give birth regardless of whether there is a war or COVID-19,” explains Mr Shypelyk.

“We also need to provide at least 2 generators to the shelter, because in case of bombing, we will not be able to transfer all equipment to the shelter. We also need additional surgical equipment. If hospitals are to be shelled, we must be prepared for that.”

“Health workers must be protected in order to continue to save lives,” says Dr Jarno Habicht, WHO Representative to Ukraine. “Similarly, health facilities must be protected and remain functional, safe and accessible to all who need essential medical services.”

The oxygen supply situation, meanwhile, is also at a very dangerous point in Ukraine. Trucks are unable to transport oxygen shipments from plants to hospitals across the country, including in the capital Kyiv.

Despite the challenges posed by the current situation, WHO is actively looking at solutions to increase supplies. This will likely include the importation of oxygen (liquid and cylinders) from regional networks. These supplies will need safe transit, including via a logistics corridor through Poland. WHO is also working to ensure a supply of oxygen-related medical devices and trauma treatment supplies.

The WHO Director-General has announced the release of a further US\$ 3.5 million from WHO's Contingency Fund for Emergencies (CFE) to purchase and deliver urgent medical supplies. WHO's humanitarian health support is expected to increase following further needs assessments. This assistance complements the trauma care and medical supplies which WHO helped to pre-position in health facilities.

"We will continue to deliver care and support people across Ukraine affected by this military offensive," concludes Dr Habicht. "Health for all, in all circumstances, lies at the heart of our mission and mandate."

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