

Dr Jarno HABICHT,
WHO Representative,
Head of the WHO Country Office in Ukraine

COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORT FROM THE WHO

– Russia’s full-scale aggression against Ukraine became a crucial challenge for the whole world. Following the invasion on 24 February 2022, the World Health Organization designated the emergency as grade 3, the highest-possible one. What transformations has the emergency response mechanism undergone in practical terms? How has the WHO Country Office in Ukraine adjusted to new circumstances?

– WHO’s role extends beyond policy advice, dialogue, and technical assistance. For emergencies, this meant scaling up our emergency response from 2 regions response and whole country preparedness to the response across Ukraine since February 2022. We have been actively involved on the ground, conducting situation analyses in hospitals and primary care centres and enhancing disease surveillance in public health. As the situation evolved, our efforts expanded and adapted.

We have been engaged in strategic repositioning work even before the invasion to ensure the availability of medical supplies and to conduct pieces of training to equip healthcare professionals with the skills and tools needed to work in emergency situations.

While the Russian Federation’s invasion of the country continues, Ukraine progresses further, and the health system is resilient despite facing regular challenges, including attacks on health. WHO focuses the support simultaneously in several directions: emergency response to urgent humanitarian needs and early recovery to ensure the system continues to provide services for all Ukrainians on government-controlled areas, including liberated regions. The third direction is to continue health reforms to be sure the health system progresses.

However, the past 1.5 years have been intense, as public health needs and the situation have constantly evolved. Initially, our team consisted of 100 members, but in response to the growing demands, we have expanded to approximately 300 people spread across various locations in Ukraine, including Kyiv, Dnipro, Odesa, Poltava, and Lviv.

Throughout this challenging period, we have continued to collaborate closely with national and local authorities, as well as the community, to ensure an effective response.

– *The World Health Assembly condemned Russian aggression against Ukraine, including attacks on healthcare facilities, in its resolution WHA75.11 in 2022 and the decision WHA76(8) in 2023. Please tell us about the progress in the resolution implementation so far. Could there be more severe measures against Russia due to its persistent violations of the resolution?*

– I would like to start by describing the specifics of the WHO diplomatic response on a global and regional level.

A full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine gathered absolute attention, including the UN system. I must admit the healthcare sector was one of the first to adopt clear resolutions and take some actions.

It is somewhat unique that in one hundred days of the war, from 24 February 2022, we already had two resolutions: one in early May 2022 from the special session of the Regional Committee for Europe (SS RC) and the second resolution was adopted a few weeks after – at the WHO World Assembly in Geneva (WHA). Both are about the state of emergency in Ukraine’s healthcare system and the Russian Federation’s aggression. When the invasion started, during the next few months, our team prepared rapid needs assessment with access to healthcare services in Ukraine¹. This report went directly to participants of the SS RC that took place under the initiative of 43 WHO Member States (out of 53) from the European Region. Another quite unique situation was when member states (43 mentioned above) requested the WHO Regional Director for Europe, Dr Hans Henri P. Kluge, to convene the special session, not the Secretariat, which can usually be an initiator.

In the resolution adopted during SS RC, there was a request to Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the WHO Director-General, to prepare a report assessing the health emergency in Ukraine and proposed responses. It also proposes considering the possibility of moving the office working with noncommunicable diseases from Moscow.

Before WHA 2022, the WHO Director-General visited Ukraine. It was his first visit to the country. Together with Viktor Liashko, the Minister of Health of Ukraine, he visited healthcare facilities in Kyiv region and met Ukrainian health workers to hear about their first-hand experience and challenges they face amid the war.

The World Health Assembly demonstrated its condemnation of Russian attacks on Ukraine’s healthcare system through a resolution while simultaneously rejecting a parallel proposal from Moscow. This resolution addresses various concerns, notably focusing on both direct and indirect health repercussions within Ukraine, its neighbouring regions, and beyond. It explicitly denounces documented attacks on healthcare, as tracked by WHO’s Surveillance System for Attacks on Health Care.

¹ WHO (2023) *Rapid needs assessment: access to health care services 2022*. Available at: <https://www.who.int/europe/publications/m/item/rapid-needs-assessment-access-to-health-care-services-2022>

It was very important that before high-level events in May 2022 and May 2023 there were health reports prepared and provided by the WHO Ukraine team as a milestone to document the impact on the health of Ukraine, including the impact after attacks on the health system in Ukraine.

An additional milestone decision transpired this year during the WHO Regional Committee for Europe Special Session in May. Supported by 30 Member States, this decision saw a majority advocating for the closure of the WHO European Office for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases situated in Moscow. The proposal stipulated the relocation of its functions and management to WHO Europe in Copenhagen, Denmark, by no later than 1 January 2024.

During the 76th World Health Assembly held in May 2023, the WHO Director-General presented a report on the organisation's support for humanitarian and emergency health response. The resolution adopted during WHA requested the Director-General to continue supporting the health sectors of Ukraine and refugee-receiving and -hosting countries using a health system approach.

Since February 2022, WHO has verified over 1,260 attacks on health in Ukraine. This marks the highest number of attacks recorded by WHO in any humanitarian emergency. The war in Ukraine has brought about immense challenges, leading to an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. Therefore, it is crucial to have an official platform to report attacks on health, ensuring that all incidents are appropriately documented and brought to the attention of the UN Security Council. Without such a platform, the risk of misinformation and confusion would be significant.



Україні передано 59 автобусів з метою збільшення інтенсивності вакцинавання населення під час війни

Donation of 59 buses to scale up vaccination in Ukraine amidst the war

– *The WHO Country Office in Ukraine has continued to perform its functions under difficult war conditions. Can you share the most considerable campaigns the Office has managed to implement since 24 February 2022?*

– One of the crucial areas that we are focusing on is recovery. Recovery is not just about physically rebuilding but it is also about getting the health system to function providing essential services such as vaccination programmes and chronic disease management. WHO provides technical advice and support in addition to humanitarian aid, including bringing in health supplies and equipment.

Rebuilding the health system is critical for national recovery by ensuring that essential services are restored and that there can be a response to new and increased needs, such as for mental health, rehabilitation, and public health surveillance.

For us, it was essential to support not only emergency response and actions directed at sustaining the health system functioning under immense stress but also to initiate, as soon as possible, strategic thinking about the future of the health system in light of the war conditions and lessons that we had already learned from the first months of war. In 2022, the WHO supported the Government of Ukraine in developing several crucial policies to improve health system development planning and post-war recovery thinking. The National Health System Post-War Recovery Plan, presented during the Ukraine Recovery Conference in Lugano, drew on the draft National Health Strategy 2030 and established a constructive dialogue on rebuilding a better health system in line with the previous health reform agenda.

Early in the war response, WHO developed the policy note *Principles to Guide Health System Recovery and Transformation in Ukraine*, aimed at raising awareness of the importance of health sector for country's peace and recovery. The document identifies key investment criteria that would make the health system more efficient, people-centred and resilient.

Following that, WHO supported the Government of Ukraine by obtaining feedback and conducting policy dialogue around the updated Health Strategy 2030 and post-war recovery plan. Thus, WHO convened a joint forum with the European Union Delegation to Ukraine, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Mission in Ukraine, and the World Bank, to contribute to an ongoing dialogue on overcoming the war impact challenges for the health sector, but also to identify immediate priorities and opportunities to build a better-functioning health system in scope of recovery efforts, balanced with long-term goal of the universal health coverage. A discussion paper developed out of this – *Priorities for Health System Recovery in Ukraine* – describes a shared vision regarding key priorities for the sector over the next 18–24 months.

Finally, in preparations for the Ukraine Recovery Conference 2023, WHO published *Case studies of health system recovery in Ukraine: focus on the role*

of the private sector, where we demonstrate real recovery and reconstruction efforts happening on the ground to demonstrate to the whole world that international partners who are considering to support Ukraine that they don't have to wait until the war is over to do so.

These documents are meant to provide technical advice and guide national health stakeholders in their decision-making processes on how to respond to war challenges and what to prioritise in recovery actions. It's not easy to continue the health reform under conditions of the full-scale war. Still, we do see how previous reform components and new design features – such as national health budget pooling under NHSU, universal non-contributory health entitlements, family doctor campaigns, Affordable Medicines outpatient programmes, electronic health systems and others – have contributed to the health system's resilience in the face of war impact. It's important to continue the health reform, even while the war is ongoing, to make the Ukrainian health system more efficient in light of tight fiscal space and ensure better financial protection for the population of Ukraine.

WHO provides comprehensive support to the Government, particularly the Ministry of Health, which entails continuous assistance in various areas. Since 24 February 2022, WHO has reached approximately 9 million people in Ukraine with health emergency response efforts through various health interventions, including direct delivery of medical supplies and equipment, technical support through training and guidelines, and coordinating health partners.

Efforts are being made to prioritise Ukraine on the international health system support agenda. In 2022, we witnessed significant visits by key WHO figures: Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General, visited Ukraine for the first time, and Dr Hans Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe, has made multiple visits since the start of the Russian Federation invasion.

Resource mobilisation efforts in 2022 proved successful, resulting in the receipt of US\$140 million in support of WHO's response in Ukraine and refugee-receiving countries. In 2022, WHO procured 2,100 metric tons of medicines and medical supplies for Ukraine, totaling over 75 million dollars.

It is important to highlight that Ukraine also plays a significant role in health and development, presenting valuable opportunities for other countries to learn from its experiences. Additionally, Ukraine is an active member of the WHO governing system, including the Standing Committee of the Regional Committee (SCRC). In a noteworthy development, Viktor Liashko, the Minister of Health of Ukraine, joined the Executive Board of the World Health Organization in May 2023.

And despite the ongoing war, health reforms in Ukraine have continued. The direction of reforms begun in 2016 is consistent with international good practice. The war does not change this. We have prioritised health sector reforms



Д-р Ярно Хабіхт під час візиту до мобільної команди первинної медичної допомоги у Харківській області

Dr Jarro Habicht and the WHO team visiting mobile primary health care team in Kharkiv region

and are supporting the country in setting up new health systems, from health financing to primary care, to increase transparency in procurement. As WHO, we are proud to be part of this change and to use our seven decades of experience to support the Ukrainian health system.

– *In temporarily occupied territories and areas close to the frontline, people suffer from the inability to obtain necessary medications, such as insulin, highly active antiretroviral therapy, or inpatient treatment in hospitals. What measures does the WHO take to ensure that the needs of people with medical conditions are met?*

– As I have observed during my recent visits, including those close to the frontline and other war-damaged zones, attacks on health have had a profound impact on the population's access to essential health services and medicines, leading to the closure of pharmacies. Approximately one in five people across the country face challenges in obtaining essential medicines, while in areas of occupation and active conflict, this number rises to one in three. Although there has been some improvement since the early days of the full-scale invasion, high medicine prices and limited availability remain significant barriers to accessing necessary medications. Households have reported difficulties in obtaining pain relievers, heart medications, and medicines for high blood pressure.

According to WHO's health needs assessment, the proportion of people facing difficulties due to rising medicine costs has increased. However, there has been progress, with only 7% of respondents reporting being unable to obtain

necessary medicines in April 2023, compared to 22% in September 2022. Nevertheless, medicines continue to be a major driver of financial hardship for Ukrainians, significantly contributing to out-of-pocket spending on healthcare.

To address these challenges, it is essential to foster cooperation among all stakeholders, including pharmacies, most of which are privately owned in Ukraine. The recovery and re-launch of pharmacy operations, particularly in areas recently re-taken under the control of the Government of Ukraine, are crucial for the population to access medicines, including through the governmentally funded Affordable Medicines programme.

WHO has taken proactive measures, organising numerous regular convoys and donations to newly accessible and Ukraine government-controlled affected areas, providing medicines and emergency care supplies to ensure that health facilities can continue delivering life-saving and essential health services. Since 24 February 2022, WHO has delivered approximately 3,700 metric tons of medical supplies to Ukraine. These efforts aim to alleviate the burden on the health-care system and meet the urgent health needs of the population affected by the ongoing crisis.

As part of the larger UN effort, we conduct inter-agency convoys to the front-line, delivering packages of medicines and supplies needed by primary health-care workers in the affected areas. Other UN agencies provide food, water, and blankets to complement our support to communities on the frontline. In humanitarian settings, we aim to complement each other and work in synergy with the country's efforts to address the urgent needs of civilians, particularly the elderly with chronic diseases who prefer to remain in their homes.



Д-р Ярно Хабіхт разом із командою Бюро ВООЗ в Україні відвідує Київський міський центр крові

Dr Jarro Habicht together with the WHO Ukraine team visiting Kyiv city blood center

More than 17,500 people living in Ukraine's regained territories received medical care from WHO-supported national emergency medical teams (EMTs), from which 12,765 people were supported following the liberation of Kherson and then the Kakhovka dam incident. Launched at the beginning of 2022, the EMT project assists civilians affected by the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine. Without it, many of those living within the regained regions would not have access to critical care.

Primary care facilities and health care workers there also receive support from WHO with medicines and necessary supplies to provide health services, which are much needed in the communities of liberated areas where a lot of elderly people live with chronic diseases.

To support communities in remote areas affected by the war, where primary health facilities have been damaged or destroyed, the WHO, in partnership with the Ministry of Health, has installed modular primary health care clinics. The project started from Iziurm and Kherson, where clinics have already been settled, and more are planned for regions, including Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Sumy, Kyiv, and Odesa. We prioritise the availability of essential health services, and in collaboration with our partners, we are working hard to make it possible.

– *The WHO Country Office actively works with a variety of Ukrainian agencies ranging from the Ministry of Health of Ukraine to medical facilities. Please tell us more about the activities of the WHO Country Office in different regions of Ukraine and cooperation with local institutions.*

– WHO operates in all regions of the country under Ukrainian government control, supporting health needs such as increasing vaccination efforts or laboratory testing nationwide. However, our humanitarian response primarily focuses on areas highly affected by the war, particularly in the East and South of Ukraine. In these regions, we have established hubs to coordinate our efforts and provide prompt support in coordination with the Ministry of Health and regional authorities.

For instance, following the Kakhovka dam explosion, WHO strengthened surveillance of waterborne diseases, including cholera, and conducted situation analyses and rapid risk assessments. We provided laboratory test kits and urgently responded to meet people's immediate and ongoing health needs in the affected areas.

Our dedicated team continues to work on the ground, collaborating closely with national and local authorities, as well as the community. We also work with various partners, including volunteers who assist in delivering supplies and medicines to the frontline. Additionally, through the health cluster, we collaborate with more than 200 partners, including local and international NGOs, UN agencies, and multilateral organisations. Each partner plays a unique role, from providing services to delivering supplies.



Д-р Ярно Хабіхт та команда Бюро ВООЗ в Україні відвідують Ірпінську центральну міську лікарню

Dr Jarro Habicht and the WHO Ukraine team on a visit to Irpin Central City Hospital

– *The physical rehabilitation of people affected by the hostilities plays a crucial role in developing Ukraine’s healthcare system. This primarily concerns the availability of prostheses, skin grafts for treating burns, etc. How does the WHO contribute to solving such problems?*

– WHO has been providing comprehensive support to the Ministry of Health and the Government of Ukraine in developing amendments to legislation, new by-laws, and regulations related to rehabilitation pathways and the provision of assistive products, including prosthetics. A rehabilitation strategy was formulated to strengthen rehabilitation services and improve access to assistive devices across the trauma pathway.

Since the start of the Russian Federation’s full-scale invasion, WHO has distributed over 7,000 essential assistive products to rehabilitation hospitals, benefiting around 4,000 patients in 10 regions. Additionally, 100 rehabilitation workers were trained by WHO to ensure the effective use of these products. Furthermore, 1,300 internally displaced persons with rehabilitation needs were provided essential assistive products by trained rehabilitation professionals who conducted assessments, prescriptions, fittings, and user training under WHO’s guidance.

WHO’s significant support extends to the Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) Rehabilitation Centre. Local interdisciplinary rehabilitation personnel have been trained to function as the national centre for SCI rehabilitation. To further strengthen

SCI rehabilitation, a multidisciplinary team of 10 international experts was deployed to the Rivne region, where they developed the national referral hub for spinal cord injury rehabilitation. Training sessions were conducted in four acute hospitals in Rivne, Vinnytsia, Kyiv, and Ivano-Frankivsk regions, focusing on severe spinal cord injury care and sharing best practices to prevent complications during the rehabilitation period.

In addition, efforts are underway to raise the bed capacity of the centre to accommodate up to 100 patients. Data collection is ongoing to identify areas of improvement within the services provided. These initiatives aim to enhance the quality and accessibility of rehabilitation services, ensuring that individuals with spinal cord injuries receive the best possible care and support on their road to recovery.

– *War has a terrible impact on Ukrainians’ mental health, and providing psychological assistance is a priority. In your opinion, what are the main challenges we have to overcome in this regard? What projects does the WHO Country Office in Ukraine work on to help Ukrainians overcome the problems arising from war experience?*

– As the main technical partner for the All-Ukrainian mental health programme initiated by First Lady of Ukraine Olena Zelenska, WHO provides crucial support to this initiative, aiming to develop a comprehensive system for the provision of mental health and psychosocial support services.

With approximately 10 million people potentially having a mental health condition, the need for mental health and psychosocial support services in Ukraine is substantial. In response, WHO works on various fronts to address these needs.

Firstly, WHO supports the integration of mental health services into primary care, strengthening the capacity of Community Mental Health Teams, and promoting self-help strategies. These efforts collectively contribute to mitigating the negative impact of war-related consequences on the mental health of the Ukrainian population.

One of WHO’s key programmes in this regard is the Mental Health Gap Action Programme (mhGAP), which involves training primary healthcare workers, including family doctors, paediatricians, therapists, paramedics, and nurses, to increase access to mental health services.

In November 2022, the WHO, the Ministry of Health of Ukraine, and partners signed a memorandum of cooperation on building primary healthcare workers’ capacity to manage common mental health conditions. WHO provides overall coordination, training and technical guidance to 21 humanitarian and development partners, including MoH and NHSU, engaged in the mhGAP initiative in Ukraine. So far, nearly 3,000 primary healthcare workers have been trained on mhGAP, and about 30,000 participants have completed an online self-paced course.

Another critical aspect is strengthening the capacity of Community Mental Health Teams (CMHTs) to provide specialised mental health care in the community for individuals with severe mental health conditions as an alternative to institution-based care.

Challenges in this effort include creating a comprehensive system that covers different sectors providing affordable, quality, and evidence-based mental health services to all in need. To address this, WHO aims to spread knowledge about self-help skills and support among as many people as possible, reducing the strain on the mental health system. To achieve this, 475 trainers will train representatives from various sectors, including medical and social services, law enforcement, educators, NGOs, railway, and enterprises, to help adults experiencing adversity learn how to manage their stress.

Despite the ongoing full-scale war, WHO is dedicated to continuing the reform and change of the mental health system. Mental health is now a vital component of the health response, and in collaboration with the First Lady of Ukraine, Olena Zelenska, the Office of the President, and the Ministry of Health, WHO has launched a critical initiative for mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS). This initiative prioritises numerous actions to address the mental health needs of Ukrainians across the entire system.

– *What are the key reforms that Ukraine needs to implement to make its health-care system more effective?*

– The health system in Ukraine operates in a dynamic environment, with significant reforms adopted six years ago in 2017, resulting in a whole new health system architecture. Key milestones include the establishment of a national benefits package, the Programme of Medical Guarantees, administered by the single national purchaser of health services, the National Health Service of Ukraine. The Affordable Medicines Programme defines outpatient medicines coverage and expands annually, aligning these components with international best practices.

The health system's resilience during these trying times is partly attributed to these reforms and the dedication of Ukrainian health workers. Despite the ongoing war, the reforms continue, and there is hope for more political will to make the health system more effective, people-oriented, and supported by sound public health policies to achieve Ukraine's EU aspirations.

The Ministry of Health is currently reviewing and approving the updated National Health Strategy 2030, setting the strategic direction for the system while responding to ongoing health emergencies. This commitment to reforms is crucial for international organisations considering support for Ukraine, ensuring long-term stability and system performance.

WHO prioritises health system recovery in Ukraine, aiming to restore essential services such as rehabilitation, primary health care, and public health



Д-р Ярно Хабіхт, Представник ВООЗ в Україні, зустрівся з медичними працівниками мобільних команд первинної медичної допомоги та пацієнтами під час візиту до Чернігівської області

Dr Jarro Habicht, WHO Representative in Ukraine, meeting health care workers of mobile primary health care teams and patients during a visit to Chernihiv region

surveillance for overall national recovery. High-quality health services and medicines instil a sense of security, foster trust in local and national government, and facilitate people's return to their homes. While the PHC reform has shown results, it is not yet complete, demanding improvements in service quality and accessibility, particularly for vulnerable populations.

Efficiency of hospital infrastructure is another concern in the recovery planning process. Optimisation of the hospital network, even during the war, is crucial to meet the growing population's needs. A leaner network with expanded PHC access, integrated specialised facilities into general hospitals, and delivery by multidisciplinary teams align with modern evidence-based practices.

Ongoing challenges for future health reforms relate to increasing financial protection for the population, improving system efficiency, and ensuring equity. The health system's longstanding underfunding and reliance on out-of-pocket payments need to be addressed. Focusing on policies like network optimisation, selective purchasing, and prioritising public spending on comprehensive primary care, including better access to medicines and diagnostic tests, can improve the situation.

While financial protection in Ukraine is weaker compared to many European countries, there has been improvement before the war. With the necessary political commitment and local managerial competencies, Ukraine can continue health reform and enhance the functioning and performance of its health system, with WHO ready to provide support.