Ukraine health system buckling under weight of humanitarian crisis

16 January, 2015: Increased access to a wide range of health care services is needed for more than 5 million people affected by the humanitarian crisis in eastern Ukraine, according to the World Health Organization.

Access to primary, secondary and emergency health care services, as well as medicines, is critically needed.

WHO and health partners urgently need at least US$23 million to provide improved health care to more than 5 million affected people in eastern Ukraine, of whom 1.4 million are considered to be highly vulnerable and in need of humanitarian health assistance, according to Dr Dorit Nitzan, WHO Representative to Ukraine. Great health needs exist across the country, in particular in the Donbas region.

To try meet the many needs, WHO is working with humanitarian organizations as part of the Health Cluster response, to provide primary health care services, medicines, ambulances and other essential medical items to ensure Ukraine’s most vulnerable communities receive support.

WHO has also been requested by Ukraine’s Ministry of Health to, for a temporary period, take on responsibility for the procurement and distribution of all essential medicines required by the health system.

“The humanitarian health crisis in Ukraine is severe. Insecurity, displacement and cold weather, combined with the poor state of the country’s health system, means that basic health care is out of the reach of many people,” says Dr Nitzan. “The needs are huge, and international support is vital to ensure that health care is provided for Ukrainians at this difficult time.”

The gravest health challenges are being faced by the estimated 700 000 people internally displaced inside Ukraine, along with the Roma community, children, women, elderly, as well as people living with disabilities and the chronically sick. Pregnant women, people suffering from cancers and diabetes, and those needing mental and psychosocial support are among many Ukrainians requiring health support. There is also the risk of outbreaks of communicable diseases, including vaccine preventable diseases like polio and measles.

Other health challenges include:

- The average vaccination coverage in the country is well under 50%.
- About 30 to 70% of health care workers have fled the fighting areas or died.
- People living with HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and drug users are currently at high risk for interruption of care and control services in the Donbas region. There are indications that the TB incidence has been increasing.
- Adequate emergency medical services are insufficient.
WHO actions include:

- Coordinating the health sector response;
- Supporting delivery of essential health services through mobile clinics in the fields of communicable (specifically tuberculosis, HIV and polio), noncommunicable diseases, vulnerable groups and right to health, mother and child and environmental health.
- Delivering medical supplies and medicines to treat hundreds of thousands of people, in partnership with the Norwegian and Israeli Governments.

The Ukrainian health system was weak already before the crisis and is now completely collapsing in fighting areas and areas where many displaced people have found shelter. In and around the cities of Donetsk and, particularly, Luhank, government health care provision has been reduced to a minimum level, or is non-existent in some cases. Essential services have broken down, including water and power supplies. Lootings and destruction of health care facilities are common; more than 50 health care facilities have been partly or completely destroyed.

Related content:
- WHO European Regional Office website on Ukraine: http://www.euro.who.int/en/countries/ukraine

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