

Concerning the Humanitarian Crises in Ukraine

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Abstract:

The humanitarian crises in Ukraine recall other armed conflicts that resulted in needless death, destruction and the flight of refugees in pursuit of safety.

In some ways, the international cable television network coverage of the conflict in Ukraine may have brought a greater sense of immediacy to the devastation being experienced by the people there. Foreign press coverage in the early weeks of the conflict utilized “on the ground” correspondents reporting in real time on the atrocities they were witnessing. Eventually, the intensity of the armed conflict, coupled with the death and serious injury of journalists, caused some media outlets to withdraw some of their personnel to safer locations.

The War in Ukraine might be further categorized as two humanitarian crises: the plight of citizens remaining in the country including the forces attempting to defend against the Russian invasion and more than 3.7 million so far who have become refugees. The displacement of civilians from Ukraine is now

the largest such exodus in Europe since World War II (Economist, March 19-25, 2022). However, the refugee flight is smaller than from the recent civil war in Syria.

Within the Country

The invasion of Ukraine has seriously hampered the provision of medical care to the nation's residents.

In a joint statement from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the World Health Organization (WHO), the parties called for „an immediate cessation of all attacks on health care in Ukraine“ (WHO, March 12, 2022).

The statement continued:

„These horrific attacks are killing and causing serious injuries to patients and health workers, destroying vital health infrastructure and forcing thousands to forgo accessing health services despite catastrophic needs.“ (ibid)

Among the most heavily devastated cities in Ukraine is Mariupol. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) addressed the situation in Mariupol by stating:

„Hundreds of thousands of the city's residents are now facing extreme or total shortages of basic necessities like food, water and medicine. People of all ages, including our staff are sheltering in unheated basements, risking their lives to make short runs outside for food and water... Lifechanging injuries and chronic debilitating conditions cannot be treated. The human suffering is simply immense“ (ICRC, March 13, 2022)

The Washington Post (March 17, 2022) reported that the WHO had verified 43 attacks „including assaults on patients, health care workers, facilities and infrastructure“. The Post also reported that the shelling of cities, supply routes and shipping ports had made it „nearly impossible for international aid including life saving medication to be delivered including cancer drugs, insulin and dialysis supplies“.

The American Cancer Society formed a network of volunteer oncologists to connect virtually with physicians and cancer patients in Ukraine (Wall Street Journal, March 12-13, 2022). has been forced to suspend much of its work in the country, but is continuing to donate medical supplies and is setting up sites at the Ukrainian border (ibid).

Internally Displaced Persons and Refugee

Since the invasion of Ukraine began on February 24, 2022, there has been a large displacement of Ukrainian civilians. The United Nations estimate that approximately 6.5 million are Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) who left their homes because of the armed hostilities but still remain in the country and more than 3.5 million who have crossed international borders and are classified as refugees (UN News, March 21, 2022).

Since men between the ages of 18 and 60 were to remain in Ukraine as military or volunteer defense forces, the vast majority of IDP and refugees are women, children, and the elderly, many of whom require medical care including medication.

In the early days of the invasion, attempts were made to establish humanitarian corridors for the safe passage of hospitalized patients, IDP and refugees. But many of the corridors have been subjected to military attack and were unable to facilitate safe passage. Beehner & Spencer (2022) point out that despite anticipated benefits of the corridors to aid in the safe passage of non-combatants, their use can also lead to increased civilian deaths as happened in Grozny and Aleppo when the cities from which the corridors lead are presumed clear of non-combatants and military forces shell nonmilitary targets without limit.

The vast majority of the refugees from Ukraine have migrated to eastern European nations immediately adjacent to the war-torn country: Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Moldova. From there, many have migrated further west into Europe and some have gone north to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. A small number migrated from the eastern provinces into Russia.

The European Union (EU) has given Ukrainians the right to live and work anywhere in the 27-member countries for up to one year (Dalton, 2022). The EU is also providing tens of billions of dollars from its budget for member states to provide housing, medical care, education and other support (ibid).

The Legal Implications

The International Court of Justice in the Hague, The Netherlands issued on March 16 „a preliminary but likely unenforceable order“ to Russia to cease military operations in Ukraine. The suit was filed by Ukraine which claimed that Russia justified the invasion on the false pretext „of stopping a purported genocide in Ukraine’s Russian-speaking Luhansk and Donetsk regions“ (Bravin, 2022). Russia claims the court lacks jurisdiction in the dispute.

Courts in The Hague may also end up dealing with civil litigation or enforcement of a treaty to end the conflict. Ukraine has already suffered hundreds of billions of dollars in damage to its infrastructure. Assuming a negotiated resolution to hostilities, the issue of reparations will most likely be discussed. Might some of Russia’s financial assets impacted by international sanctions remain out of reach of the Kremlin until there is some agreement as to how Ukraine is to be compensated for the damages it has suffered?

The International Criminal Court in The Hague has begun an investigation on whether Russia has committed war crimes in Ukraine. The Council on Foreign Relations has written that the invasion of Ukraine „constitutes the crime of aggression under International Law“ (Scheffer, 2022). He writes: ...“all uses of armed forces by Russia on Ukrainian territory can be viewed as illegal“ (ibid). He argues further that Russian activity constitutes not only war crimes, but also crimes against humanity and genocide.

Conclusion

The invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent relocation of approximately ten and one half million people constitute two of the most significant humanitarian crises since the World War II. The destruction of health care facilities within country, combined with the health needs of IDP and refugees, are presenting an ongoing needs for international support for the Ukrainian people. That need for international support of health need may continue for years into the future.

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