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Russian Forces Continued its Attack on Ukraine's Health System in 2023

GENEVA – The Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition (SHCC) has released a report (available in [English](#) and [Ukrainian](#)) documenting 394 incidents of violence against or obstruction of health care in Ukraine in 2023. The ongoing conflict, initiated by Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, has left nearly a [fifth of Ukraine's territory](#) under occupation and has caused extensive damage to civilian and energy infrastructure. Over 12 million Ukrainians have faced [energy disruptions](#), and severe flooding in June 2023 further exacerbated the humanitarian crisis, affecting over sixty thousand people. About 40% of the Ukrainian population is [estimated](#) to require humanitarian assistance in 2024.

Health care in Ukraine continued to be attacked by Russian Federation military forces in 2023. Many incidents involved health facilities being affected multiple times, notably the Beryslav Central District Hospital which was damaged on six occasions. The number of health worker deaths rose in 2023, with many military medics killed on the front lines. Health facilities continued to be repurposed by Russian forces as military hospitals and used for non-medical purposes in the temporarily occupied parts of Ukraine, with patients and staff forcibly evicted. Attacks by drones armed with explosives increasingly impacted health care. While the company that had manufactured these drones was not recorded in most incidents, on at least one occasion an Iranian-made Shahed-136 drone damaged Kherson Regional Psychiatric Care Institution and injured a doctor as he tried to evacuate the patients from the facility to a bomb shelter.

“As this war rages on, we are witnessing the impact of protracted conflict on the health care system and the population's health. For Russia, it's no longer just about damaging Ukrainian hospitals. It is about controlling the population by depriving them of basic rights, such as access to health care, especially in Russian-occupied territories where critical medical services and medications are [denied to those without Russian passports](#). Additionally, attacks on critical energy infrastructure are designed to instil fear which might limit the functionality of the health care system. These patterns of violence must be investigated by prosecutors and accountability mechanisms,” - **Uliana Poltavets, Ukraine Emergency Response Coordinator, Physicians for Human Rights**

In 2023, health care provision in Ukraine was significantly compromised, especially in Russian-occupied territories and eastern areas near front-line fighting. In Donetsk oblast, a [third of health facilities](#) were non-functional and another third were partially functioning due to insecurity and damage. This compounded obstacles to accessing health care that already existed in the Russian-occupied territory of Autonomous Crimea as [early as 2014](#), when civilians who did not take up Russian citizenship were barred from receiving medical

treatment and obtaining medication. Russian doctors were **deployed** to replace Ukrainian doctors, causing operational and psychological issues due to differences in practices.

In non-occupied Ukraine, most health facilities **remained functional**, thanks to the **high quality** of the health system before the invasion and **rapid repairs**. However, economic barriers such as **rising medication prices** and state budget cuts hindered access to treatment. A **survey** found cost to be the main barrier for one in ten people in front-line areas. Specialised health services, particularly for cancer, were **disrupted** due to a lack of equipment and personnel, likely leading to long-term health consequences. The overall damage to health facilities since the invasion began was **estimated** at USD 2.9 billion as of September 1, 2023, highlighting the need for substantial investment to restore and improve Ukraine's health care system.

Among the report's recommendations are:

- The International Criminal Court and national courts, through principles of universal jurisdiction, should, at long last, initiate prosecutions for war crimes and crimes against humanity involving attacks on the wounded and sick and on health facilities.
- Governments should cease arms transfers to parties to conflict that engage in grave breaches of international humanitarian law.
- Ministers of Health should engage with their own military and security forces and armed groups to protect health care from violence and strengthen mechanisms to mitigate the impacts of attacks on communities, health workers, and the health system.
- Regional bodies and the UN humanitarian cluster system should expand initiatives to protect health care in conflict and mitigate the impact of violence against it.

In its 11th annual report, ***Critical Condition: Violence Against Health Care in Conflict***, the coalition documented 2562 incidents in conflicts across 30 countries, or regions within countries, or territories in 2023, a 25% increase from 2022, representing *500 more* attacks than documented last year, and the highest ever since the **Coalition** began reporting “Violence against health care reached appalling levels in 2023, said **Leonard Rubenstein, Chair of the Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition (SHCC) comprising more than 40 nongovernmental organisations**. “Whether a product of recklessness, indifference, or intentional targeting, fighting forces’ contempt for the law brought catastrophic harm to those in need of care and the health workers and systems intending to aid them. The world fails to ensure accountability for this violence at its peril.”

Methodology Note: The **data** in this report is **compiled** from open sources and partner-agency contributions of information, date, time, and location of incidents of violence and obstruction of health care in 2023 and is based on the WHO definition of attacks on health care. Due to this **methodology**, there are some differences between SHCC's numbers and other reports. Explore the incidents visually on this interactive **map** available in English and Ukrainian.

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The Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition is a group of more than 40 organisations working to protect health workers and services threatened by war and civil unrest. It has raised awareness of global attacks on health and pressed United Nations agencies for greater global action to protect the security of health care. The SHCC monitors attacks, strengthens universal norms of respect for the right to health, and demands accountability for perpetrators.