Russia-Ukraine conflict and COVID-19: a double burden for Ukraine’s healthcare system and a concern for global citizens

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ABSTRACT
The conflict between Ukraine and Russia significantly influences the healthcare sector. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the armed conflict have badly devastated the established healthcare system. Only 36.08% of the Ukrainian population has received the COVID-19 vaccination, with the majority receiving two doses, and currently, Ukraine records the highest mortality rate in the world. In addition to the conflict injuries, increased susceptible deaths to COVID-19 can be found due to inadequate vaccination rates for the disease. To save their lives and for their well-being, many individuals have been relocating to the underground metro stations, other cities, nearby towns and countries. In these settings, social distancing, hand sanitization and wearing masks are not prioritised. In the current circumstances, the broken healthcare system needs to be rebuilt, and the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), doctors and all the front-line workers should extend their humanitarian support to the Ukrainian population. Conclusion: It is an arduous task for healthcare organisations to supply vaccines and medicines in this ‘armed conflict’ between Russia and Ukraine. This can only happen when both parties extend their support to rebuild the shattered healthcare infrastructure.

INTRODUCTION
Our history teaches us that conflict frequently ends up as a catastrophic disease and is often a handmaiden of disease. Russian forces have carried out air strikes and seized army posts as they advanced towards key towns such as Kyiv. This confrontation would throw Ukraine’s daily operations into disorder, affecting food and water supplies, the education network, sanitation systems, and healthcare facilities. Furthermore, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine coincides with the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. According to Our World in Data estimates, only 36.08% of Ukraine’s population has been vaccinated whereas 34.84% of them have completed the initial vaccination protocol, and there has been 27 538 new cases on the 24 of February 2022, the highest number of new cases reported on a single day. The low vaccination rates during the COVID-19 outbreak were still a major concern and they resulted in a Polio outbreak in 2021. Vaccination initiatives had a low response during the COVID-19 outbreak, in the sense that the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact in providing vaccines. So as a result Polio cases started to rise. Ukraine is currently fighting a dual war against SARS-CoV-2 and the conflict, with the conflict exacerbating the health problems. The WHO, the European Union and other agencies have gathered resources and endowments for Ukraine’s population. Without a doubt, this support from the international community won’t fulfill the entire demands of the people. With limited flying routes, restrictions on mobility and travel, and unceasing bombardment and gunfire, the supply of vaccinations, medications and food will diminish. As a result, the number of COVID-19 cases is expected to rise as more people seek refuge in closed subway systems and bunkers or migrate to more shielded and safer places. In the past, conflicted regions such as Syria and Afghanistan have served as a sanctuary for disease outbreaks. If this disagreement continues, it will be disastrous for Ukraine’s healthcare system.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE RUSSIA-Ukraine CONFlict
COVID-19 spread, and the Ukrainian healthcare system
Since 2014, Ukraine was already engaged in a confrontation with Russia. And, as is well known, epidemics thrive on conflicts. As a result, although Ukraine has spent most of its resources defending itself against the Russian invasion, it has become exposed to multiple infectious diseases. The Russian invasion has wreaked havoc on primary healthcare facilities. Children in conflict zones suffer the most since they do not receive necessary vaccinations. This explains the Ukrainian polio outbreak from 2014 to 2017 and the measles outbreak in 2016. Ukraine’s failure in dealing with COVID-19 is exemplified by the fact that less than 36% of the Ukrainian population has received vaccines. This indicates that Ukraine has one of Europe’s slowest immunisation rates. While the number of COVID-19 cases in Ukraine has significantly decreased, public health experts warn that large migrations of people in eastern Europe may result in newer infections.

Many Ukrainians are now seeking sanctuary in Poland, which has postponed its customary coronavirus quarantine and testing procedures for people fleeing the country. The present humanitarian and refugee crises in eastern Europe will have long-term health consequences, which the coronavirus pandemic will exacerbate.

Given the close relationship between war and disease, it is plausible to foresee a surge in reported COVID-19 cases as an aftermath of the current escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. To further complicate the situation in Ukraine, WHO reported that crucial health services such as ambulances are now at risk of getting caught in the crossfire. The consequences of such a major hurdle for patients requiring time-critical interventions in the hospital will be highly disastrous. Not only that, but patients who do make it to hospitals encounter severe constraints such as power outages and oxygen shortages.

Concerns for human rights, food security, and impact on the EU and globally
The consequences of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has had a negative impact on human rights. The long-term implications of this armed conflict on the protection and promotion of human rights in Ukraine will be profound, resulting in...
The Russia-Ukraine conflict and COVID-19: double burden for the healthcare system and a concern for global citizens (figure 1 was drawn and analysed by authors AM, OU, and AO).

**Figure 1** The Russia-Ukraine conflict and COVID-19: double burden for the healthcare system and a concern for global citizens (figure 1 was drawn and analysed by authors AM, OU, and AO).
interference. Moreover, the conflict of war and the COVID-19 pandemic have massively burdened the healthcare system, and presently the whole world needs to raise its helping hands and provide health resources to the fullest in terms of health education, vaccines and food supplies.

References