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AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

18 November 2024 EUR 50/8743/2024

UKRAINE: RUSSIAN STRIKES EXACT INCREASINGLY HEAVY TOLL ON UKRAINE'S CHILDREN

INTRODUCTION

Many organizations documenting civilian casualties in Ukraine have reported a significant increase in 2024.[1] Figures reviewed by Amnesty International, including those published by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR), suggest that the summer of 2024 may have been the deadliest time for civilians since 2022. Due to their unique vulnerabilities, children have been particularly affected.

The vast majority of civilian casualties in Ukraine are caused by explosive weapons,[2] which pose unique risks to children. Research shows that the anatomy and physiology of children puts them at particular risk. Children cannot afford to lose as much blood as an adult, and their thinner abdominal walls combined with proportionally larger vital organs make them more vulnerable to blasts and trauma.[3] Children are significantly more likely to suffer head injuries from blast incidents, and eye and ear injuries – very common blast injuries – have severely injurious long-term effects on children.[4] Beyond the immediate physical effects, so-called "reverberating effects" of explosive weapons, for example resulting destruction of housing, schools, water and sanitation facilities and other civilian infrastructure, can have devastating long-term effects on children.[5]

Amnesty International has consistently highlighted how Russia's war of aggression has affected children, including the forced transfer of children from occupied territories[6] and the effects the war and occupation are having on education.[7] Yet nowhere is the impact more evident than the physical and mental trauma caused by indiscriminate attacks and those that apparently deliberately target children, such as the attack on the maternity hospital and drama theatre in Mariupol documented by Amnesty International in June 2022.[8]

During the period of January to September 2024, Amnesty International's Digital Verification Corps analyzed more than 120 videos and images, verifying 17 incidents in which children were casualties. Three incidents in particular, further documented by Amnesty International researchers on the ground, highlight the ongoing toll that Russia's aggression is having on Ukraine's children.

[1] United Nations Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR), "Ukraine: protection of civilians in armed conflict", September 2024 update; Action on Armed Violence, "Civilian casualties in Ukraine surge by 28% over six months", 20 September 2024, aoav.org.uk/2024/civilian-casualties-in-ukraine-surge-by-28-over-six-months-aoav-reports/; Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, "Fifth Interim Report on reported violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law in Ukraine", 22 July 2024, osce.org/files/f/documents/a/e/573346_3.pdf
[2] OHCHR, "Two-year update, Protection of civilians: impact of hostilities on civilians since 24 February 2022", 15 February 2024, ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/two-year-update-protection-civilians-impact-hostilities-civilians-24.pdf, p. 2
[3] International Committee of the Red Cross, "Childhood in rubble: the humanitarian consequences of urban warfare for children", 25 May 2023, icrc.org/en/document/childhood-rubble-humanitarian-consequences-urban-warfare-children, p. 26
[4] Save the Children, "Blast injuries – the impact of explosive weapons on children in conflict", 16 May 2019, savethechildren.org.uk/content/dam/gb/reports/blast_injuries.pdf, pp. 10-12
[5] Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, "Explosive weapons and the children and armed conflict agenda", 17 April 2024, watchlist.org/wp-content/uploads/explosive-weapons-and-the-children-and-armed-conflict-agenda_final_digital.pdf, p. 14
[6] Amnesty International, "Ukraine: Like a prison convoy: Russia's unlawful transfer and abuse of civilians in Ukraine during 'filtration'", 10 November 2022, EUR 50/6136/2022
[7] Amnesty International, "Ukraine: Children's education is one more casualty of Russian aggression", 11 December 2023, EUR 50/7508/2023; "Ukraine: School Teacher: A high-risk job under Russian occupation", 4 October 2024, EUR 50/8578/2024
[8] Amnesty International, "Ukraine, "Children": The attack on the Donestk Regional Academic Drama Theatre in Mariupol, Ukraine", June 30 2022, EUR 50/5713/2022

ATTACK ON SPORTS CLUB IN DERHACHI, 2 MAY 2024

Amnesty International documented an unlawful attack in Derhachi, Kharkiv oblast, that hit a children's sports club while a karate lesson was taking place inside. Six children were injured, including 10-year-old Artem, who told Amnesty researchers: *"We were training, we were doing our karate. Then we heard a very loud bang and all the shrapnel flew through the windows and came at us. I jumped to the floor, and then in a few seconds everyone screamed and ran, and I got hurt in the leg. It hurt. I couldn't walk for three days."*[9]

The aftermath of the attack on the sports club in Derhachi, Kharkiv oblast, 2 May 2024.
Facebook, Serhiy Bolvinov.

Amnesty International verified one video and ten images recorded after the strike that show the damage to the building, including windows and walls. Blood stains are visible on the mattresses of the sports club, floors and walls. Amnesty International visited the site, and interviewed other witnesses and victims of the airstrike, in which a precision guided glide bomb was used. The Kharkiv Regional Prosecutor's Office posted an image to Telegram which, according to them, was taken near the location of the strike and shows the remnants of a Russian 250kg UMPB D-30 SN glide bomb.[10] Russian authorities did not comment on this attack.

Under international humanitarian law, all parties to a conflict must, at all times, distinguish between civilians and civilian objects (such as sports clubs for children) and military objectives. Direct attacks on civilians or civilian objects are prohibited and are war crimes. Indiscriminate attacks – those which fail to distinguish as required – are also prohibited. Where an indiscriminate attack kills or injures civilians, it amounts to a war crime.

[9] Interview with Amnesty International in Kharkiv, August 2024

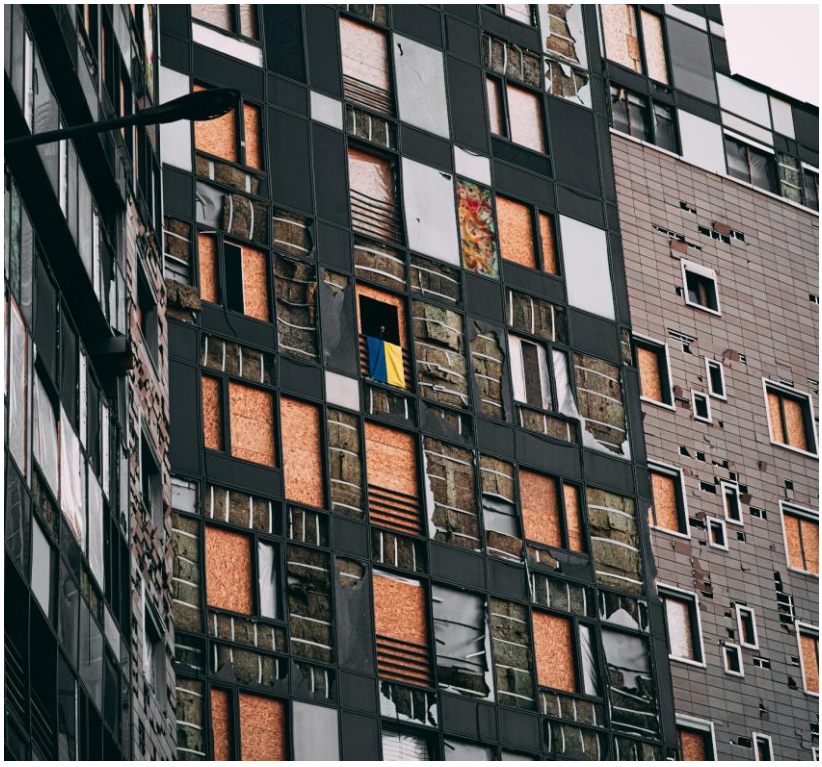
[10] See Telegram photo, 02 May 2024 https://t.me/prokuratura_kharkiv/15679

ATTACK ON OKHMATDYT HOSPITAL, 8 JULY 2024

"The explosion was so strong that I immediately found myself on the floor. There was dust, glass, everything was falling around me. I lay on the floor for a few seconds, feeling a ringing in my ears and a vacuum; I couldn't hear anything. I just saw the ceiling and cabinets collapsing. When I came to my senses, I realized everything around was in ruins. I was injured too — I felt warmth all over my body and saw that I was bleeding, but my arms and legs were functioning, and I was breathing. I crawled a little and saw that the child was okay, although the equipment was destroyed."

- Oleg Golubchenko, surgeon at Okhmatdyt children's hospital who was operating on a child at the moment of the strike[11]

On 8 July 2024 a Russian cruise missile struck Okhmatdyt children's hospital in Kyiv, causing massive damage, killing two people, and injuring over a hundred more including children. The missile struck the toxicology building in the hospital complex, destroying the building and causing severe structural damage to other specialized departments, including the intensive care unit.



Okhmatdyt children's hospital, Kyiv,
following the Russian cruise missile strike on 8 July 2024. © Joël Gugler

Amnesty International researchers visited the site in August 2024, interviewing five staff members and witnesses to the attack. Amnesty International and its Digital Verification Corps also verified 14 images and six videos showing the missile strike and the aftermath. The images show severe damage to the hospital wards, broken windows and debris, as well as blood stains.

Amnesty International was not able to find any evidence of a military presence in the sprawling hospital complex, whose sheer size makes it very unlikely that the cruise missile – which has been credibly confirmed by Conflict Armament Research (CAR) investigators as the new, highly accurate Kh-101[12] – was aimed at a different target and missed. The available evidence therefore strongly suggests that this was a direct attack against civilians and a protected civilian object, which killed and injured civilians, and constitutes a war crime.

"Fortunately, the first missiles were intercepted, giving me a few minutes to enter the administrative building and go down to the basement. A few minutes later, powerful explosions began, one of which hit our hospital building, just 20 meters from where I was with my colleagues in the shelter… A minute after the explosion, I went outside… In the window, I saw my colleague. She was still showing signs of life, but she was badly injured and quickly succumbed."

- Serhiy Chernyshuk, Medical Director of Okhmatdyt Hospital[13]

[11] Interview with Amnesty International in Kyiv, August 2024
[12] CAR, "New Kh-101 missile used to strike Kyiv children's hospital" August 2024, storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/edb4ed8bf3604c4ca47707ed1fe3a56c
[13] Interview with Amnesty International in Kyiv, August 2024

Olena Barkova's 10-year-old goddaughter Daryna was one of 627 children in the hospital on 8 July. She was undergoing intensive chemotherapy at the hospital on the morning of the attack. Her godmother told Amnesty International: *"During the evacuation, it was complete chaos. We were running down the stairs, where there was blood. Children with cancer, who had no contact with the outside world, were forced to crowd together with everyone else in the basement. The whole hospital was there. It was unbearable."*[14]

Daryna and her family fled Mariupol in 2022, the site of intense and indiscriminate bombardment and shelling by the invading Russian forces, for the relative safety of Kyiv. Her family are convinced that the constant trauma and stress of her experiences contributed to the development of her cancer. Daryna is in remission at the time of writing, but her family lives in fear that further trauma could lead to further health problems.

ATTACK ON LVIV, 4 SEPTEMBER 2024

Yevheniia (43), Yaryna (21), Daria (18), and Emilia (6) were all killed when Russia attacked Lviv on 4 September. Yaroslav spoke to Amnesty International after losing his entire family. Telegram, Andriy Sadovyi.

In the early morning of 4 September 2024, Russia launched at least 42 drones and cruise missiles at Ukraine.[15] The attack killed eight civilians in the western city of Lviv, including four members of one family. Despite its relative distance from the front, Lviv has not been spared during Russia's aggression against Ukraine. According to Maksym Kozytsky, Head of Lviv Regional Military Administration, as of October, the city had been hit 21 times in 2024, with Russian missiles and drones often damaging residential buildings, schools and other educational institutions.[16]

When the air raid siren sounded on 4 September, Yaroslav Bazylevych and his family therefore knew exactly what to do. He told Amnesty International: *"We woke up all the children, and I carried the youngest in my arms because she was sleeping. We hid in the corridor at the entrance to the kitchen according to the two-wall rule and waited for the alarm to*

[14] Interview with Amnesty International in Kyiv, August 2024
[15] Telegram, Air Force of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, 4 September 2024, https://t.me/kpszsu/18782
[16] Interview with Amnesty International in Lviv, October 2024

end. Yevheniia panicked a little bit and after the first explosion on Brativ Mikhnovskikh Street, she took all the children and went down to the stairwell with them, everyone thought it was the safest place."[17]

The first of two explosions in Lviv city centre occurred 800 metres away from Yaroslav's apartment. It caused severe damage to residential buildings, sending shrapnel through the window of a building across the street, severely injuring 69-year-old associate professor Bohdan Kryl. He spent 29 days in intensive care and succumbed to his wounds on 2 October 2024.

Five minutes after the first explosion, Yevheniia Bazylevych called her husband to tell him to come down to the stairwell, as he had briefly stayed in the apartment. *"At the moment she said those words 'Come downstairs' there was another explosion, my phone was knocked out of my hands, I couldn't see, I was dizzy and couldn't find my phone. I was so glad my family had gone downstairs to a safe place. Or so I thought",* Yaroslav said.

The munition that struck Yaroslav's apartment at that moment caused massive damage. The entire top floor of the building was destroyed, collapsing floors, blowing out windows and scattering fragmentation across the neighbourhood. The stairwell in which seven civilians including Yevheniia, and daughters Yaryna (21), Daria (18), and Emilia (6), were sheltering collapsed around them. Despite the efforts of rescuers to clear the rubble, all seven people were killed.

Russia claims that the "high precision strike" of 4 September used Kinzhal hypersonic missiles and drones; was aimed at military and industrial facilities in Lviv and; "hit all intended objects."[18] As with the other incidents documented by Amnesty International, there was no evidence of legitimate military targets at the site of the two explosions in Lviv city centre. While Amnesty International was not able to independently verify the munitions that struck these residential areas, this strike fits the pattern of Russian attacks, with large explosive weapons that appear to have been used in an indiscriminate attack, or in attacks which deliberately target civilians and civilian objects in densely populated residential areas.

CONCLUSION

Since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia has killed and injured tens of thousands of civilians. Deliberate attacks on civilians and civilian objects, or the killing and injuring of civilians in indiscriminate attacks has been met with impunity. Conflict observers agree that the initial phase of the invasion was the deadliest period for civilians, as intense hostilities occurred in major population centres such as Mariupol. Since then, many civilians have managed to evacuate from the most dangerous areas as the frontlines have consolidated in the east and south of the country. Yet as of May 2024, there are increasing reports of casualties among children and other civilians, meaning nowhere in Ukraine is safe. Russia has attacked cities far from the frontlines, such as Lviv, and appears to have deliberately struck civilian infrastructure, as well as civilian objects such as children's hospitals (which enjoy special protection under international humanitarian law) and recreational areas.

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has been characterized by war crimes and crimes against humanity. Russian political and military leaders are subject to International Criminal Court arrest warrants, which – though welcome – in their pursuit of justice for war crimes and crimes against humanity, have not deterred the continuing killing and maiming of children. Ukraine's most vulnerable citizens continue to pay the heaviest price for the international community's inability to stop the aggression and ensure justice and accountability. It is vital that the sense of impunity that encourages crimes under international law, and other gross human rights violations is dispelled. It is the responsibility of the whole international community to ensure that everyone who is suspected of individual criminal responsibility for war crimes and crimes against humanity is brought to justice. To deter further war crimes and crimes against humanity, the prospect of being held individually responsible must be tangible, realistic, even inevitable.

[17] Interview with Amnesty International in Lviv, October 2024

[18] Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, "Сводка Министерства обороны Российской Федерации о ходе проведения специальной военной операции (по состоянию на 4 сентября 2024 г.)", 4 September 2024, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12527894@egNews

RECOMMENDATIONS

CALLS ON THE RUSSIAN AUTHORITIES:

- Immediately end Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.
- End all direct attacks on civilians and civilian objects, all indiscriminate attacks, and other serious violations of international humanitarian law.
- Conduct independent, impartial, and effective investigations into all unlawful attacks on civilians, as well as into all allegations of war crimes and other crimes under international law, and bring those suspected of individual responsibility, regardless of their rank, to justice in fair trials without recourse to the death penalty. Such investigations must include the attacks on the Derhachi sports club on 2 May 2024, Okhmatdyt children's hospital on 8 July 2024 and residential areas of Lviv on 4 September 2024.
- Ukrainian victims of war crimes committed by Russian forces must have full and effective reparation, including – among others - the truth about what happened, compensation appropriate and proportional to the gravity of violations, and effective guarantees of non-repetition.
- Cooperate fully with the International Criminal Court's investigation in the situation of Ukraine.

CALLS ON OTHER STATES:

- States must ensure that Ukrainian victims' rights to truth, justice, and reparation are fully realised.
- ICC member states must comply with obligations under the Rome Statue of the ICC to arrest and surrender those subject to ICC arrest warrants falling within their jurisdiction.
- States should commence investigations and prosecutions pursuant to the principle of universal jurisdiction, against those suspected of committing war crimes and other crimes under international law.
- Every state in the world is under an obligation to search for persons alleged to have committed, or to have ordered to be committed, war crimes amounting to 'grave breaches' of the Geneva Conventions, and to bring such persons, regardless of their nationality, before its own courts.