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Chechnya: The Republic of the Wolf

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Chechnya
the Republic of the Wolf

"By day a Chechen may seem a peaceful citizen, but at night he is a WOLF."
—Russian Major

In a state of humanitarian crisis, Chechnya, the poorest of states within the Russian Federation, continues to strive for independence. The present arsenal of landmines consisted primarily of PMN and OMYF mines. Snacks of PMN were moved to secret bases in the mountain regions during the war. There is also a considerable black market for landmines.

The Russian army and the Chechen rebels have used mines in the previous and current war, laying mines around their bases, checkpoints, militarily significant towns, and roadways. Mines have continued to be used as booby traps in houses and schoolyards, and littered around corpses. AP mines, while used by the military on both sides, are also used by various armed groups and robbers in attacks against political figures.

From 1994 to 1996, the Russian Federation waged war against the Chechens in an attempt to halt the country's growing independence. The number of civilian dead as a result was estimated between 40,000-100,000. At the start of the war, mines were still being cleared from WWII. HALO Trust said it had seen new mine fields laid even after the previous peace agreements had been signed in 1996. The intensity of Russian bombardment of Chechnya is said to have exceeded Stalingrad. Russian bombardment of Sarajevo reached 3,500 per day, Grozny experienced 4,000 shells per hour. The Russian Federation blanketed Chechnya with 1,200,000 landmines during the 1994-1996 war and estimates of the cost of damage may be as high as $150 million. Despite Chechnya's high level of military action, the Chechens still remain unlisted on the UN landmine list. Even though a peace agreement was signed on August 4, 1995, bloodshed has again found this country escalating the landmine crisis as landmines are laid indiscriminately and as the front line shifts.

During the previous war, as control shifted from one side to the other, territories were repeatedly mined and re-mined. Landmines may affect as much as 80 percent of Chechnya. Because of the current fighting and because no mine field maps have been made available, a comprehensive survey is nearly impossible. Before the current war, there were 600,000 people in Chechnya living beside over 1.2 million landmines. HALO Trust estimates that 20,000 hectares of farmland cannot be used because of the presence of landmines. This has severe consequences for communities that must rely on farming for sustainability.

In the first three months of fighting, from October-December 1999, a force of up to 100,000 Russian troops had taken almost total control of Chechnya's lowland valleys and steppe. The remaining areas had been held by the guerrillas. Pairs of Grozny itself and the steep gorges in the mountains to the south, are much more difficult military targets for a conventional army. Despite heavy fighting in early January, neither side appeared to take significant gains in the south. Both forces occupied high points on the outskirts of the city for a considerable time. There was constant fire from mortars, cannon and light arms. At night, tracer fire lit up the sky. It was impossible to know how many residents were still trapped in the city, but there were clearly thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, living in dark cellars with little food. "The city has been heavily mined by the Islamic guerrillas Russia invaded Chechnya to oppose," General Kazarov said. If his troops tried to storm the city, large numbers of people would certainly be killed and wounded.

Russia's military Commander, General Viktor Kazarov felt his forces have been too "tender hearted" in Chechnya. The Russian army then formulated new policies in an attempt to gain a better foothold with the rebels. Use of field air explosions, pressure on the Moscow media not to give "air time to terrorists," and the alarming new policy to round up all Chechen males between the ages of 10 and 60 are some of the Russian army's tactics to bring about resolution. Many of the Chechen males are expected to be sent to internment camps (prison camps). Human Rights Watch has reported unspeakable acts of torture on the men and women held in these camps.

Russian history is full of precedent for this type of military action. The Czar and Stalin had also attempted ethnic cleansing of the Muslims because the Muslims had wanted independence from Russia. The attempt to prevent Chechnya's independence by Russia may only result in a long, bloody and continuous war.

Sadikov, a deputy of the Russian State Duma, predicted the Chechen war is likely to turn into an Afghan-type guerilla war that will last for years. The Chechens may continue to fight slowly, patiently and without rest until they have their freedom.

Western nations have encouraged a cease-fire, but Russia has refused, stating that a cease-fire would only allow the rebels to regroup. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright encourages Russia to seek a political solution to Chechen independence. France and Britain have hinted at the possibility of sanctions on Russia. "One cannot take a civilian population hostage, threaten to treat an entire population as terrorists, and ask us (European nations) to show understanding," said spokesperson Catherine Colonna. The International Monetary Fund announced that if the release of funds to Russia had been delayed until Russia implements legal and administrative changes though some sources deny that...
the delay is relabeled to the current situation in Chechnya.  
Mine action funding, mine clearance and mine awareness are completely non-existent in the current state of crisis in Chechnya. The few NGOs that have operated there can only spend limited time in the area. The ICRC withdrew after the assassination of six workers in 1996. MERLIN, (Medical Emergency Relief International) did distribute mine awareness posters from 1996-1998, but withdrew later that same year.  
HALO Trust withdrew in December 1999.
HALO must have been one of the last NGO's operating in Chechnya. When the fighting got too severe for mine clearance work, HALO switched its efforts to moving medical supplies between hospitals and maintaining generators for the civilians. Recently, when the Russians bombarded a mine field that HALO had been clearing, three of HALO's staff were killed. "There are no distinctions between civilians and military targets. If it moves it strike it with aircraft, and if it does not move they shell it," says

Landmine casualties and victim assistance data is not reliable. Estimates from the previous war site 800 casualties in 1996, half of which were children. 10 percent of children suffer from acute posttraumatic stress disorders as a result of landmine accidents. Victim assistance was nearly impossible prior to the current fighting. The health care system in Chechnya was inadequate before the war because of severe shortages of equipment, medicine and water. If medical care is available, the victim must pay for any prosthetics and crutches.

Social and economic problems were and will continue to be staggering. Lack of financial support from other countries, information blockades and the absence of humanitarian relief are all devastating to this tiny mountain country. Only a peaceful settlement and mutual cooperation will allow humanitarian organizations to safely begin the seemingly insurmountable task of rebuilding the lives of the Chechen people.

Currently, the situation for the Russian Rebels is dire. While multiple rocket launchers are still being fired at Grozny; the brunt of the fighting has now moved to the highlands, the last rebel stronghold. Russian forces have launched an intensive military attack in Akslan-Kala village where they have been many rebel casualties to include prominent rebel commanders.

Western military forces have asserted that the attack on Akslan-Kala was an ambush. The Chechens were lured there. The fighters were deliberately given a "corridor" to escape Grozny. This "corridor" was actually a mine field and several hundred rebel fighters were killed when they entered. The few dozen who successfully crossed and reached Akslan-Kala found the Russians waiting for them.

At the beginning of the new millennium, Russia is once again faced with defining its future, as it did in the early 20th century. Former President Yeltsin, chagrined by the comments of leaders in the European Union and the United States over the aggressive assault on Chechnya, has made the comment, "They must have forgotten for a moment what Russia is. It has a full arsenal of nuclear weapons." This may be so, but there is also a rampant black market operating, severe food shortages, and republics in their federation breaking away from the motherland. While one Canadian, former military Ammunition Technical Operations (ATO). The team was completed by serving military staff from Italy, the United States and Denmark. Initially envisaged as a three-month mission, its success and immediate impact persuaded the

Ammunition Storage and Disposal
Implementation Team

The latter function was undertaken in late 1998 by an eight-man military Ammunition Storage and Disposal Implementation Team (ASDIT) with members from the UK, United States, Denmark, Belgium and Italy. They carried out the training of Conventional Munitions Disposal (CMD) of 16 Albanian officers, the planning and conduct of UXO clearance tasks, EOD clearance planning, provision of ammunition storage and management training for 14 officers. They also began training for the initial Ammunition Storage Area (ASA) safety, operational assessments, improved chemical analysis training and gave advice to Albanian laboratory personnel.

EOD and Ammunition Storage Training Team (EOD and ASTT)

The mission was successful, which provided the AAF with the basic skills necessary to conduct operational tasks confidently. This mission also concluded that further assistance was necessary to assist in the establishment of a full concept of operations, signal NATO's commitment to capacity building and to maintain momentum in resolving the problem. The NATO Political Military Steering Committee (PMSC) authorized the deployment of a second mission, the EOD and Ammunition Storage Training Team (EODASTT) in early 1999.

The mission was unique in many ways because a decision was taken to contract out the technical nucleus of the team to a commercial company by way of competitive tender. Mine Clear International, a UK-based company specializing in EOD operations, was selected and provided a team of two British and one Canadian, former military Ammunition Technical Operations (ATO). The team was completed by serving military staff from Italy, the United States and Denmark. Initially envisaged as a three-month mission, its success and immediate impact persuaded the