DDG Initiates MRE in Ingushetia and Chechnya

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Danish Demining Group (DDG): Mine Risk Education (MRE) Programs in Ingushetia and Chechnya

DDG aims to educate Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in MRE through public institutions, food distribution points, traffic junctions, services at mosques and school programs.

by Michaela Bock Pedersen

Introduction

In August 2000, DDG established a MRE program in Northern Caucasus, more specifically Ingushetia and Chechnya. While the conditions for a clearance operation were not present in 2000, our only option was to conduct information campaigns on the proper behavior in relation to landmines and UXO directed at the civilian population. The area suffers from on-going fighting between rebels and Russian troops, which results in the clearance of time bombs.

For strategic reasons and safety precautions, the DDG office was set up in Naraam, Ingushetia. The strategic concept was the fact that the initial MRE approach regarded IDPs, who for the most part, had fled to Ingushetia, Chechnya's western neighbor, and Ingushetia, used to be part of the joint Chechen-Ingush Republic, which means that the two groups share culture and history and most of the Chechen refugees have relatives in Ingushetia. What made the need for MRE so urgent was the fact that the IDPs would often go back to Chechnya in order to keep the claim to their property and provide for the relatives who stayed behind.

The safety precaution dealt with the fact that expatriate staff was needed for management in the initial period. In 2000, the safety conditions in Chechnya were not satisfactory since the expatriates were, and still are, popular targets of kidnapping. This means that special safety precautions have to be taken whenever travelling in the area. Armed guards are part of the everyday life of the expatriates.

Initially, DDG formed two mobile teams of three instructors and two drivers, all national staff, in order to follow the movements in the refugee camps established by the Russian government and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The DDG also aimed to provide MRE for local communities and settlements where most of the IDPs lived. The national staff uses their private cars to ensure that they are not mistaken for expatriate staff. Every week operations are planned in consultation with local authorities and safety officers in other NGOs situated in Naraam. This shows that both the Russian bureaucracy and all the necessary safety precautions make projects like this difficult and slow. However, MRE has proven to be effective and the landmines and UXO awareness has risen remarkably. By the end of 2002, all of Ingushetia was educated on the risks of mines.

Conditions

The situation has developed rapidly since the program was set-up in 2000. All the refugee camps and settlements have been covered and the number of mobile teams has been extended to three. The teams are now working inside Chechnya. The targets here are both the people who stayed behind in Chechnya and the IDPs who were forced to leave Ingushetia and return to Chechnya when the refugee camp Aki Yurti in the Malgobeksky district was closed.

The number of people involved by the war and still situated in Chechnya is approximately 700,000. These people will all be covered by the end of the program in April 2005, either by individual training or through train-the-trainers or school programs.

Working in mine action always demands great sensibility as the presence of mines always reflects political acts and belligerent acts from different parties—Northern Caucasus is no exception. Presently the area is suffering from guerrilla-like war acts and the long tradition of a Soviet mind-set during the cold war means that DDG is on the edge of facing wrongful charges. This demands a great deal of negotiating skills and notifying of the federal security service, Federalnaja Sluzhba Bezopasnosti (FSB)—former KGB—of all activities. The information structure includes, the military commander in Grozny, FSB, and the Russian Governmental Authorities. The regional military commander and the regional political institutions in each of the 14 regions should also be notified. There is no doubt that DDG is the most sensitive part in the humanitarian task carried out in this region.

MRE Information Campaign

In February 2001 DDG started training Chechen teachers. The intention was to provide MRE to students in Chechnya. The DDG started to provide MRE for local communities and settlements where most of the IDPs lived. The national staff uses their private cars to ensure that they are not mistaken for expatriate staff. Every week operations are planned in consultation with local authorities and safety officers in other NGOs situated in Naraam. This shows that both the Russian bureaucracy and all the necessary safety precautions make projects like this difficult and slow. However, MRE has proven to be effective and the landmines and UXO awareness has risen remarkably. By the end of 2002, all of Ingushetia was educated on the risks of mines.

The risk staff, both national and international, is facing has increased since the operations moved from Ingushetia to Chechnya. The risks include kidnappings and mock-up operations by the Russian soldiers. On one occasion only has DDG’s MRE instructors been the target of harassment by the Russian military. The cooperation of the Russian authorities has been achieved due to DDG’s extended effort to keep the Russian authorities informed on all work.

MRE Information Campaign talks were held by DDG in order to ensure the safety of the MRE instructors. The talks were held in BB-1, BB-2, and BB-3 of the Ingushetian and Chechenian IDPs. Additionally, MRE Information Campaign talks were held in Chechnya.

In August 2002 MRE instructors carried out an information campaign at the main stations in the regions Nazranovsky, Malgobeksky and Nazranovsky, Ingushetia. These stations are traffic junctions for IDPs travelling to Chechnya to visit their relatives. All taxis and buses were provided with MRE information leaflets. The information campaign is important because the IDPs living in Ingushetia are not used to the mine conditions they are returning to in Chechnya. The drivers are also given special instructions on how to behave in mine contaminated areas. This can be crucial since anti-personnel mines are also used in Chechnya.

In Chechnya, IDPs are especially at risk from mines.

Conclusion

Initially the target of DDG’s program in Ingushetia and Chechnya was to prepare the IDPs in Ingushetia for the conditions they would return to in Chechnya. The MRE campaign was mainly targeted to school children through their parents and teachers. A secondary effort was made to reach the adult population. This was done through public information, food distribution points, traffic junctions and services at mosques. The good relations DDG enjoys with the local authorities has taken a great deal of effort to bring about but in the daily work this has proven useful. There have only been very few incidents involving the authorities.

Up to now the program has been a success and an indispensable part of the development in the area. It is very important to prepare the returnees for the mine situation they will be met by in Chechnya and of course the mine risk education of the remaining 700,000 Chechnyans is crucial. Until actual clearance programs can be set-up, this effort is vital for the life and well-being of the Chechnyans.

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