

Helping Hands in a Shattered Republic:

Victim Assistance in Chechnya

Chechnya has endured over eight years of grueling combat with Russia. Thousands of landmines have been sown throughout Chechnya and the victim toll is constantly increasing. Victim assistance throughout the Caucasus has become an essential element of rebuilding the lives of those affected by landmines.

by Hayden Roberts, MAIC

Introduction

The situation in war-ravaged Chechnya is bleak, and the outlook for the future does not look promising. When the war between Russia erupted in 1994, no one expected the fighting would escalate to the extent it has. Not only has the war claimed the lives of those who are combatants, but it has also affected those civilians who reside in the republic. Landmines and other unexploded ordnance (UXO) have been the main cause of this far-reaching and increasing victim toll. Sadly, these civilians trip landmines while doing common, day-to-day tasks such as taking animals to pasture, collecting firewood or simply playing with friends. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), "approximately 4,000 Chechen children have been maimed or killed by mines" since the first war broke out, and a combined total of "7,000 to 10,000 people in Chechnya have fallen victim to landmines during the two wars."¹ Unfortunately for these people, not much demining can be done until the war comes to an end. Despite this, there are many groups out there dedicated to helping the Chechens overcome their terrible struggle with landmines.

The International Committee of the Red Cross

The humanitarian response the ICRC has provided to the area of the northern Caucasus is admirable. Not only does the ICRC deliver food and other sundry goods to the IDPs, they also ensure that these people have adequate access to chlorinated water, provide medical assistance to hospitals, encourage mine awareness, and work with other national organizations and societies. In the republic of Chechnya, the ICRC focuses on vulnerable groups in Grozny, Shali, Gudermes, Argun, Urus Martan, Achkhoy Martan and Kruchaloy.

In addition to the delivery of these goods, the ICRC has revived the population of Chechnya in other ways. A water pumping station in Grozny has been restored and now delivers chlorinated water to the population of the city from two tanks. However, this supply is only enough to cover the needs of about 37,000 citizens.²

The ICRC assists medical care structures in various ways as well. Donations of medical supplies and drugs have been made to nine different hospitals in Chechnya. A substantial amount of surgical equipment was also provided to these hospitals during the month of April. On March 1, 2002, the ICRC began a primary health care program. This project ensures that 23 primary medical care facilities in Chechnya are providing people with health care that they need as ICRC

specialists monitor the hospitals. In April and May 2002, the medical facilities supported by ICRC donations carried out 3,581 consultations—1,560 of these cases concerned children.² Mobile medical teams have also been introduced in Chechnya. These teams, consisting of two doctors (a general practitioner and a pediatrician), a nurse and a driver, give "basic medical advice and, if needed, distribute medicine."²

Mine awareness programs attempt to teach groups of people the dangers of landmines. As IDPs begin to move through the republic, the threat of injury becomes imminent. It is for this reason that awareness is an important facet of victim assistance. Mine awareness has already been applied to many of the IDPs living throughout the Caucasus—with a close focus on children. The Chechen republic faces a long road ahead of them, in terms of the landmine crisis. Therefore, this is an essential method for reducing the risk of being killed or maimed by landmines.

An extensive as well as effective mine awareness program has been implemented in Chechnya via the ICRC. To target the youth, a puppet show called "The New Adventures of Cheerdig" went on a tour in the republic between February and May this year. Eighty-eight performances were brought to 13,481 children in schools in the Groznensko-Selsky, Shalinsky, Nozhai-Yurtovsky, Urus-Martanovsky and Gudermes regions.² This puppet show has also been performing at the Graphic Arts Department of the Pedagogical Institute to help out with design ideas for mine awareness billboards. A Chechen children's magazine, *Stelaad (Rainbow)*, has expressed the desire to work alongside the ICRC to help push mine awareness information and advice to the youth.

The ICRC's attempts to assist the

people of Chechnya deserves praise and applause. The neighboring republics of Ingushetia and Dagestan receive similar goods and aid on a scale that is almost up to par with the assistance Chechnya has received. If this were not enough, the ICRC has also been permitted to visit Chechens held in detention facilities in the Russian Federation and Chechnya. Here, delegates can observe and assess the conditions in which detainees are being held to ensure that treatment of these people complies with the Geneva Conventions and international law.

Let's Save the Generation

Let's Save the Generation (LSG) is a non-governmental organization (NGO) that was founded on June 1, 2001. The goal of LSG in Chechnya is to "provide humanitarian aid to disabled children, orphans and other socially vulnerable groups."³ LSG has established close working relations with many organizations including: UNICEF, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Memorial (a human rights center) and many others. It is alongside these cooperating groups that LSG hopes to alleviate the humanitarian crisis throughout the Caucasus.

As the name of this organization implies, children are the primary focus of the humanitarian aid that is provided around the region. Weekly trips to Vladikavkaz, provided by LSG, teach children the dangers of landmines through theatrical performances. During the bus ride back to camp, an LSG instructor makes a presentation in the children's native language on topics such as avoiding landmine injuries and accidents. Informational booklets are also distributed. To ensure that the children in IDP settlements are living in adequate and healthy conditions, LSG distributes many simple, but necessary, items to these people. The organization serves landmine victims in both Chechnya and Ingushetia by providing wheelchairs, canes, crutches and stationery donated by UNICEF. Other items, such as mattresses, blankets, bed linens, jackets and boots are given to IDPs as well.

Medical and psychosocial aid is another aspect of victim assistance that LSG offers to children. The organization won a small grant competition entitled "Your World in the Window," which focused on the rehabilitation of disabled children. As a result of this grant, LSG not only has a database that contains the list of children who have fallen victim to landmines and UXO, but they also monitor them to make certain that they are receiving medical aid. To facilitate medical assistance, a new rehabilitation center consisting of three tents opened for handicapped children in Camp Bella on April 18, 2002. Many UN agencies and NGOs participated in the opening ceremony. The World Health Organization (WHO) contributed by donating toys, books and craft materials to the new center.

International Rescue Committee

According to the International Rescue Committee (IRC) website, "The IRC helps people fleeing racial, religious and ethnic persecution, as well as those uprooted by war and violence."⁴ At the onset of an emergency situation, the IRC will send out assistance to the masses in the form of food, medical and health services and shelter. Assistance to Chechnya began during the first conflict with Russia from 1994-1996 and resumed in 1999 to respond to the thousands of people migrating to the surrounding areas. The organization's involvement in Chechnya has been critical, due to the massive number of people who have been displaced by the war with Russia. The IRC has estimated that over 300,000 have fled their homes to seek refuge in the Republic of Ingushetia, and 170,000 others have been displaced inside Chechnya.⁵ With this tremendous inflow of IDPs, Ingushetia's population has practically doubled.

The current role of the IRC is to implement programs that will aid the IDP population in a number of underserved locations. According to their website publication, "The IRC is currently active in four sectors of the northern Caucasus: water and sanitation, shelter, education and distribution of non-food

commodities, in both Chechnya and neighboring Ingushetia."⁵

Water and Sanitation

The water and sanitation program is one of the most far-reaching programs in the region, serving settlements and camps throughout Chechnya and Ingushetia. Purified water is sent to communities that have limited access to this basic commodity. In addition, the ICRC collects garbage and upkeeps sewage, pit latrines and bathing facilities. Fifty-six "safe water points" have been established, serving close to 60,000 people.⁵

Shelter

When thousands of people become uprooted by war, severe problems arise due to the lack of suitable living conditions. As a result, IDPs migrating into Ingushetia have created a heavy burden to its already poor population. The IRC provides improved living conditions for those living in camps and settlements. This is done by "conducting extensive repairs to walls, floors, and roofs and upgrading and installing safe gas and electrical systems."⁵ In addition, houses in Grozny, where most of the heavy damage exists, are being repaired to their original state.

Education and Distribution of Non-food Goods

Basic education and distribution of non-food commodities are other vital needs that the IRC has been providing for the Chechen IDPs. The educational program consists of formal schooling and has been serving 16 schools in settlements throughout Ingushetia. Aside from this, it also includes activities such as sports, clubs, arts and other types of recreation. A vocational training course offered to IDP teenagers in Ingushetia has given 109 participants an opportunity to receive a state certificate in one of six alternative professions.⁶ People in both Chechnya and Ingushetia have been receiving a wide variety of non-food goods. Items such as blankets, clothing, hygiene products and other supplies have been distributed on a regular basis by the IRC.

Other Noteworthy Assistance Programs

Handicap International

Handicap International (HI) is another NGO that has ongoing assistance programs throughout the Caucasus. HI has come to the aid of medical facilities by supplying sufficient tools and apparatus for rehabilitation programs. Through April and May of 2002, HI "donated 80 adult wheelchairs, 70 children's wheelchairs and 15 walkers to people who had lost their mobility."³ HI additionally provided materials and medical equipment, such as a portable x-ray machine and osteosynthesis material, to improve the capacity of trauma units in four Chechen hospitals. To increase the medical personnel's knowledge of post-operations practices, HI held a two-week training course from May 26 through June 6 in the republican hospital in Nazran. Here, nurses and staff could focus on the different aspects of rehabilitation.

United Nations Children's Fund

Through many different programs, UNICEF has been relieving the displaced people in the Caucasus. UNICEF, by means of the Orthopedic/Prosthetic Workshop in Vladikavkaz, serves mine victims in Chechnya. This UN-funded workshop is currently the only clinic in the region that can fit mine victims with prostheses and orthoses that they need. Aside from the workshop, a physical rehabilitation center in Vladikavkaz treats mine victims with massage therapy, physiotherapy and therapeutic ultrasound technology. UNICEF-hired psychologists are posted at both facilities to provide counseling to the women and children that have been affected by mines or other UXO.

Conclusion

As long as Chechnya's ongoing war with Russia endures, the effects on the civilian population will be devastating. Landmines will continue to be planted, which will lead some to experience lifelong physical injuries and also perpetuate the fear that will drive others to become IDPs. This short-term migratory situation can lead to several long-term problems that could have disastrous repercussions within the Caucasus: overpopulation, epidemics and outbreaks, unsanitary living conditions, and an overburdened society. It is for this reason that the problems landmines have caused have become exceedingly obvious. The overall extent that landmines have permeated the lives of the Chechens has made it a necessity for victim assistance to carry over to those who have not yet been injured. In addition to the aid organizations previously mentioned in the article, many other international agencies and NGOs, have been actively involved in alleviating the crisis in Chechnya. These other organizations, such as Médecins Sans Frontières [Doctors without Borders], International Human Initiative, Voice of the Mountains, World Vision International, Care International and Médecins du Monde [Doctors of the World] have helped support hospitals, health posts and clinics in several towns and IDP camps. The time and effort that have been put into assisting the IDP population in the Caucasus today has created a hope for a better tomorrow. ■

Endnotes

1. Bagrov, Yuri. "New Limbs for Chechen Children." *The Moscow Times*. April 25, 2002. Page 4.

2. ICRC Update. *Northern Caucasus and Southern Russia: Facts and Figures on Recent ICRC Action (April-May 2002)*. Geneva, Switzerland. July 2002. Page 4.

3. Lazarus, Jeffery, Irina Tarakanova and Dr. Mark Tsechkovski. "WHO Health Action in the North Caucasus, April/May 2002." Extracted from the WHO Regional Office for Europe website.

- http://www.euro.who.int/emergencies/Activities/NcaucusesTop.

5. International Rescue Committee website. <http://www.theirc.org/index.cfm?section=about>.

10. International Rescue Committee. "The IRC in Ingushetia and Chechnya." <http://www.theirc.org/where/index.cfm?locationID=12>. New York, New York. December 2001.

6. UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). "Humanitarian Action in the Northern Caucasus Information Bulletin." June 16, 2002.

Contact Information

The International Committee of the Red Cross
19 Avenue de la Paix
CH 1202 Genève
E-mail: press.gva@icrc.org

The International Rescue Committee
122 East 42nd Street
New York, New York 10168
Tel: (212) 551-3000
Website: www.theirc.org

Handicap International
Susan Walker
Tel: (207) 935-2633
E-mail: sbwhandicap@igc.org

Hayden Roberts
MAIC
Tel: (540) 568-2810
E-mail: anne_hayden999@yahoo.com