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Chechnya

by Kateland Shane [Mine Action Information Center]

More than a decade of conflict between Russian armed forces and Chechen separatists has left Chechnya polluted with landmines, improvised explosive devices and unexploded bombs. Although clearance has been limited, organizations such as UNICEF have brought victim assistance and mine-risk education to Chechnya and its neighboring regions.

Continuing Violence

Two periods of fighting, known as the First and Second Chechen Wars, have rendered Chechnya heavily contaminated by mines and unexploded ordnance, with an estimated 123 minefields recorded in 2003.¹ The first conflict lasted from 1994 to 1996 and the second period began as a Russian military campaign in October 1999. Today, ongoing violence between Chechnya and Russia continues. The conflict has been so severe that several human-rights groups have accused Russian forces of brutality.² In 2006, Russia reported that its forces were still laying anti-personnel mines in Chechnya for the purpose of protecting important facilities.³ Russia has also dropped cluster bombs in several locations in Chechnya during both periods of fighting, causing many civilian casualties and leaving unexploded ordnance. One of the most serious attacks involved the bombing of the Grozny Market in 1997, which left 137 people dead and many more injured.⁴ It is estimated that 15 percent of the munitions used in Grozny alone failed to detonate.¹

Chechen insurgents have also used mines, improvised explosive devices and other guerrilla tactics extensively against Russian forces. Although there have been no reports of large-scale mine production in Chechnya, authorities discovered several rebel arms caches in Chechnya in 2005 and 2006, containing weaponry such as mines, IEDs, mortars, grenades and other explosives.⁵ Since 1994, UNICEF has recorded over 3,000 mine- and UXO-related casualties in Chechnya, and over 700 of these incidents have involved children.⁶ Chechnya is not an internationally recognized state and therefore cannot participate in any legislation concerning the use of mines or other weapons.

Clearance Activities

Despite the urgent need for mine and UXO clearance in Chechnya, it has been difficult for demining agencies to enter the region for large-scale clearance activities

due to the ongoing conflict. The political sensitivity surrounding the conflict is illustrated in the example of The HALO Trust, an international nongovernmental organization that entered Chechnya in 1997 to conduct trainings in mine/UXO clearance. The group was forced to leave Chechnya in 1999, however, after the Federal Security Service of Russia accused HALO of espionage and aiding the Chechen rebels, which HALO vehemently denies.⁷ In 2005 the Emergency Committee of Russia entered Chechnya for a short demining mission, in which they cleared 61 hectares (151 acres) of land and located and destroyed 3,845 pieces of UXO.⁸ UNICEF also reports that the Russian military has been conducting some clearance along the main roads and railways of Chechnya.⁹

Mine Action in Chechnya

Due to the lack of a mine-action authority in Chechnya and the surrounding region, UNICEF has assumed the position as the coordinating body for mine action activities in the North Caucasus.¹ UNICEF has had a strong presence in both Chechnya and neighboring Ingushetia¹⁰ since 2001 and, with the support of local and international nongovernmental organizations, has helped to bring mine action and other humanitarian activities to the North Caucasus. Organizations have particularly focused their efforts on the safety and health of the children of Chechnya and Ingushetia. UNICEF has reached children both in and out of schools with the creation of a mine-risk education curriculum and presentations in affected communities with the assistance of Let's Save the Generation and Voice of the Mountains, two local Chechen NGOs. A total of 400 children received psychosocial support at the Psychosocial Center in Grozny through activities such as counseling, music, dance and art.¹¹ Thirty-two leisure centers have been created for children living in the most mine/UXO-affected communities.⁹

In addition to UNICEF, the International Committee of the Red Cross and Danish Demining Group have also been very active in Chechnya. In 2006 DDG conducted MRE workshops for construction workers, educating them about the dangers of mines and UXO, as numerous accidents have occurred in Grozny during the reconstruction of roads and buildings. In total DDG reached over 3,000 people in Chechnya with its MRE materials and school presenta-

tions.¹² Both the ICRC and DDG have been responsible for the construction of safe play areas for Chechen youth.

Mine Action in 2007

This year, UNICEF plans to support the formation of a Mine Information Center in Chechnya, headed by Voice of the Mountains. The center will be the main resource for information concerning mine- and UXO-related casualties, the most mine/UXO-affected communities, and the preparation of MRE and other activities. UNICEF will also continue to support mine victim-assistance activities in Chechnya, such as the Grozny Prosthetic Workshop, which provides trainings in the enhancement of prosthetic-orthopedic devices for survivors. In the area of MRE, UNICEF also plans for the implementation of a large festival, "Mines Free Chechnya," to be held on two occasions, which will involve youth and media to heighten awareness of the need for clearance activities. MRE presentations will be also conducted by Voice of the Mountains' instructors and by the State Chechen Drama Theatre actors.⁹

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