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Kimberly P. Hill

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notes
FROM
the
FIELD

THE LEGACY OF WAR IN C·H·E·C·H·N·Y·A

by
Kimberly P. Hill

Hundreds of lives are destroyed daily; most of which are left unrecorded and unacknowledged. The struggles and suffering of a few bears witness to the atrocities of many forgotten casualties and even survivors of all ages. The epidemic of landmines continues to devour many lives in its path, but it is the aid of others and the written words of some that convey the true horror of their reality.

War Zone—Grozny

The heat pounded down upon the necks of two figures standing on the stairs as they glanced around at the void that was once their home, but now lay in ruins. They lit their cigarettes and continued to smoke as they probed beneath the surface of the debris. The smoke was a screen the two used in hopes of dissipating the stench that permeated throughout the rift in their basement. The dust spun around them in circles, gagging the two survivors as they stared down into the hole, bewildered by what was left before them and sick from the smell of the victims left behind. The two 15-year-old boys, Magomed and Ruslan, stood at the opening in amazement at the devastation. Magomed said emotionlessly, "Corpses. There are still a few of them down there, but we leave them because it is too dangerous to try to clear them away." Magomed and Ruslan also spoke about explosions and bombs that would flash across the night sky leaving their town paralyzed with fear and at the light of day, shattered from the damage. At the age of 15, an age of innocence for many, these two boys were left to pick up the remaining pieces of their lives and attempt to mend them back together, despite the ongoing war.

Fatima Umarova, a farmer in the village of

Goiskoye, south of Grozny, looked over the fertile plains, which extended beyond her yard to the edge of the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains. She looked upon this untended land as a death trap waiting to destroy what was left of her family. Her life has been torn apart and now, although she is mending her home, she is still left to face many of the continuing horrors of war. All of the Umarova's cattle were sacrificed in the war, so they are not forced to venture into the dangerous fields as much, but many families are faced with the daily challenge of sending



Before the fighting intensified, humanitarian aid was available to the citizens of Chechnya.

Photo c/o ICRC / Charles Page

their sons into the mined pastures just to herd their cattle and make a living. The majority of landmine victims are children. They are often gathering wood, tending to animals, and, like any child, exploring.

Upon arriving in Chechnya, HALO Trust, a British charity dedicated to disposing of explosive debris across the world, said, "There is an urgent need for demining in Chechnya." Their teams discovered a total lack of equipment, training and organization despite the constant support of the Chechen government. HALO theorized that a year's worth of work would cost up to \$1 million to safely clear the areas needed. The need for reinforcements in Chechnya continues to grow because even as the teams disperse and begin their demining, Russian troops lay more landmines, counteracting everything that the teams have established. ICRC member, Paul Costella, said, "Mines are defensive weapons. They are cheap and simple to use and they are a vital part of the former Soviet military doctrine." ICRC has also been one of the forerunners in the attempt to get humanitarian aid to the civilians in Chechnya. ICRC, like HALO trust has unfortunately been forced to evacuate Chechnya until safety can be guaranteed.

Shamil Basayev, a separatist senior militia commander, returned to Chechnya in hopes of clearing away the landmines, but found that without the aid of maps and special equipment, he was of little help. As of the 1980 protocol, maps of the mine fields were encouraged, but most have been lost or destroyed during the succession of wars. The original protocol never mentioned the use of landmines in an internal conflict, like the detachment of the former Soviet Republics. A new condition to include the internal conflicts came into effect in 1999. Another approach to demining was to utilize the people who originally laid the landmines, but most had died in the course of the wars leaving the survivors clueless as to mine field marking.

The Russians have randomly dropped thousand of "leaf" bombs into the woods and mountains, killing innocent and unsuspecting civilians. Many say, this current war has been a war against the civilian population, an ethnic cleansing. Unfortunately, this bombing of civilian targets happens everyday and shatters thousands of lives. Injured victims face another challenge, the hospitals. Over two-thirds of the hospital facilities in Chechnya were destroyed during the previous war (1994-1996). The main hospital in Grozny was bombed in 1996 by the Russians. The hospitals in Chechnya are under-staffed, un-equipped and hundreds of new victims arrive in search of treatment. Most of the staff are volunteers, as they have only received three months pay for the

last two years. The prosthetic facilities are just as cumbersome because of the lack of funding and support. As of 1999, reports showed that over 3,500 people were in need of artificial limbs and the only landmine victims who receive the prosthetics are those who have enough money to buy one. There are no real rehabilitation programs in Chechnya. People in need are funneled into other programs in nearby countries.

A spokesman for a Russian arms dealer, Rosvo-oruzheniye, stated that Moscow now complies with an international export embargo which prohibits them from selling the landmines outside of the country, but the internal affairs still rage on unaffected. The Russian government is not the sole proprietor of these deadly weapons, as corrupt or financially challenged military personnel also sell these weapons to any and all that supply them with the money. One woman, Rosa, a Chechen nurse stated that, "the Russians will even deliver it." This concept is one of the reasons that demining is so frustrating because it seems as through these 'easy killers' will never disappear because of the availability in which they can be received. Whenever a conflict arises, the landmine is one of the first weapons chosen because of the ease of obtaining them and using them to protect the positions of both sides.

The plague of landmines continues to sweep further and further across the borders of Chechnya as landmines are indiscriminately laid by the Chechen rebels and the Russian army. Many believe that the future of this country as well as several other Republics is bleak and that the hope of peace seems ages away, but several NGOs and countries in the European Union are strongly encouraging Russia to pursue a diplomatic settlement to the current war. One western military expert said, "Mines are the last line of defense and they [Russians] have nothing else to replace them with. In the West, diplomacy is replacing mines. Once Russia's policy changes and relations with its neighbors are no longer hostile, there is hope, but that will be some time in the future." ■



Orthopedic Center of the Ministry of Health in Georgia.
Photo c/o ICRC / François Friedel