

Danish Demining Group (DDG): Mine Risk Education (MRE) Programs in Ingueshtia 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 Pederson

Introduction

In August 2000, DDG established a MRE program in Northern Caucasus, more specifically Ingueshtia 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 civil population. The area suffers from on-going fighting between rebels and Russian troops, which results in the continuous laying of mines.

For strategic reasons and safety precautions, the DDG office was set-up in Nazran, Ingushetia. The strategic concern dealt with the fact that the initial MRE approach regarded IDPs, who for the most part, had fled to Ingushetia, Chechnya's western neighboring country. Ingushetia used to be part of the joint Chechen-Ingueshtian 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 the spontaneous 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 Nazran. 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



■ In February 2001 DDG began training teachers.

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 Yurt in the Malgobeksky district was closed.

The number of people influenced 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.

The risk the 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 DDGs MRE instructors were the target of harassment by the Russian military. The cooperation of the Russian authorities has been achieved due to DDGs extended effort to keep the Russian authorities informed on all work.

Working in mine action always demands great sensibility as the presence of mines always reflects prior war acts and hostilities between different parties—Northern Caucasus is no exception. Presently the area is suffering from guerilla-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 spying 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 institution 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 for teachers to be qualified to provide the students with basic MRE. One teacher from each school would attend the program and finish by taking both a theoretical and practical test. The teachers would then implement the MRE program into the school curriculum. Furthermore, parents of the student were contacted and instructed on how to avoid mine accidents.

In March 2002 the program was extended to the adult population as well. After the program had been approved by the authorities, three teams of four or five instructors were sent on visits to cultural, public-service, educational and financial institutions. Both oral lectures and educational videos were presented to all staff members.

The program was one of a kind in Chechnya and warmly welcomed by the authorities. Most other organizations in Ingushetia and Chechnya only address their campaign to children and

youngsters. DDG has realized that the adult population is important to reach both because of their influence on the children's behavior and the socio-economic impact the harm to a breadwinner can have on a child's life. Even though the economic development will be very difficult to get on the track the MRE program DDG has been implementing in the area is a basis for the future development.

Another means of reaching parts of the adult population was by setting up information meetings at the mosques. This is where a large part of the male population gathers and here they are, easier to approach. The group is important to reach since they play a leading role in raising of the children that are often most vulnerable to mines and UXO.

The MRE instructors work in close cooperation with Danish Refugee Council (DRC). The instructors carry out MRE at DRC's food distribution points; in this manner, they reach more vulnerable groups of the population are reached. Information leaflets are handed out at these points and oral instructions are given.

In August 2002 MRE instructors carried out an information campaign at three main stations in the regions Nazranovsky, Malgobeksky and Sunzhensky in 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 found on the roads. Going to Chechnya without this information can be lethal.



■ In Chechnya, IDPs are especially at risk from mines.

Conclusion

Initially the target of DDGs 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 both public institutions, 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 returning refugees 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. ■

**All graphics courtesy of the author.*

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