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Chechnya: Reconstruction Amidst the War

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Chechnya: Reconstruction Amidst the War

In 2003 the need for mine action assistance in the northern Caucasus remains formidable. By furthering mine awareness, survivor assistance and data collection, organizations such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) are helping the people of Chechnya do what they can to survive during times of war.

by Kristina Davis, MAIC

Background

The recent conflict between Russia and Chechnya began in September 1991, after the fall of the former Soviet Union. Several territories in the south of the new Russian federation seceded, declaring their independence. Soon after, Chechnya declared its independence from Russia, renaming the country Chechen Republic "Ichkeria." The hostilities between the two continued to escalate until December of 1994, when Russian forces forced their way into Chechnya. The fighting persisted through 1996, when both sides came to a draw. Peace agreements were drawn up soon after, in which Chechnya won its independence beginning in 2001, yet the relationship between the two remained tense.

When Chechen rebels invaded nearby Dagestan in 1999, Russian troops were once again sent into Chechnya, and the conditions between these two countries have deteriorated ever since. Chechnya's once beautiful capital city of Grozny had been reduced to ruins by February 2000, forcing Chechen forces to abandon the city and marking the beginning of the conflict's transition into a guerilla war phase. Both sides are responsible for the widespread use of landmines and other improvised explosive devices (IEDs), causing Chechnya to be one of the most mine-polluted areas in the world.¹

The Mine Problem

Landmine use has been an integral part of the conflict between Russia and Chechnya since the fighting began in the early 1990s. Both sides have relied heavily on the devices, and Russian officials have even described the conflict as a "mine war."² As a result of the renewed fighting, no reliable data on the number of mines exists; however, it is estimated that more than half a million landmines have been planted throughout Chechnya. Grozny alone contains 123 minefields that have yet to be removed.³ Furthermore, there have been no signs that landmine use is decreasing. In guerilla-type operations, AP mine use in particular is relied upon heavily due to the fact that these mines are inexpensive, easy to deploy and "highly effective in killing and maiming human beings."⁴

Russian Forces

Russia possesses one of the world's largest stockpiles of landmines, with an estimated 60-70 million stockpiled AP mines.⁵ While Russian officials claim to have destroyed nearly a million mines, their military continues to lay landmines throughout Chechnya. Russia

stated in 2001 that mines were used “primarily on sectors of the border where difficult physical and geographical conditions do not permit other forces or methods to be employed effectively, where there are virtually no local inhabitants.”⁶ No reports coming out of Chechnya substantiate these claims.

Chechen Forces

Interviews between the Landmine Monitor and Russian engineers who have served in Chechnya indicated that Chechen soldiers have increased mine and IED use since 2001.⁷ Olara Otunnu, UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, stated in a press briefing in 2002 that children are continually enlisted by Chechen non-state actors (NSAs) to plant mines and target civilians believed to be cooperating with the Russian government. On the other hand, many experts disagree that Chechen forces would use nearly as many AP mines as Russian forces. In an interview with Tom Dibbs at the Central Asia Desk of HALO Trust, he noted that Chechen guerillas “cannot survive without local support, so there would be little point in [Chechen forces] laying indiscriminate devices.”⁸ Therefore, in lieu of AP mines, many of the mines laid by Chechen forces are either command-operated IEDs or AT mines.

Reconstruction

The current state of the war in Chechnya remains dismal. With several kidnappings, murders and suicide bombing incidents staining Chechnya’s recent history—with promises of more violence to come by some Chechen NSAs—the chances of any non-governmental organizations (NGOs) being able to travel and work within Chechnya are remote. Despite the Russian military’s efforts to clear main roads of mines, the mines remaining by the borders, towns, paths and homes of the Chechen people will inevitably continue to cause civilian casualties and hinder reconstruction indefinitely. The approximately 250,000 IDPs located within Chechnya and bordering Ingushetia and Dagestan face swelling financial and emotional pressure as they are forced to remain away from their homes and their businesses.

The most at-risk groups, according to an ICRC analysis, include internationally displaced persons (IDPs) followed by children. Since the conflict began, over 10,000 citizens have been injured or killed by explosive ordnance, almost half of which were children. In the past year, much pressure has been placed on many IDPs by the Russian government to return home, resulting in the migration of roughly 3,000 IDPs from refugee camps. Without any significant demining operations taking place in Chechnya, these IDPs face serious danger while on their way to starting new lives.

Nonetheless, there has been some improvement in the situation. As a result of a movement lead by the ICRC and UNICEF that makes mine awareness education available to many of the IDPs, about 70,000 of the targeted children and teachers had been reached. A mine awareness course incorporated into the Chechen school curricula reached about 200,000 school-attending children.⁹ The program was also designed to target adults through use of mine awareness posters, leaflets and billboards near IDP collective centers, as well as through the media with regular press conferences and television programs.

The UNICEF and ICRC program also included trauma counseling, training and prosthetic devices for mine/UXO-affected children and women. Vocational training in English and computing and sports clubs were introduced to some mine victims for social reintegration. Additionally, the Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA) database, managed by one local NGO, Voice of the Mountains, has produced statistics on its first 1,000 mine-victim cases that will help to fine-tune mine awareness activities in the region and follow up on victim rehabilitation.¹⁰ These programs will be continued through the duration of 2003, with an expected 223,000 women and children beneficiaries.

Conclusion

In an effort to see an eventual end to the violence, the Russian government has made some small concessions by granting amnesty to certain Chechen troops and by offering partial reimbursement to IDPs for returning home. Yet the fighting has not subsided, and until it does, humanitarian demining will not begin. For now, these mine awareness

programs will be the best hope for minimizing the mine victim toll.

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