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Update: The Landmine Situation in Chechnya

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JMU Update: The Landmine Situation in Chechnya

Introduction

After the collapse of the former Soviet Union in 1991, many of the ethnic and minority groups on the outskirts of the surrounding areas began to secede and declare themselves newly independent republics. The first three to do so were Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia—the southernmost of the Soviet republics. The area to the north of these republics continued to be a part of the new Russian federation, although the people of the area were not Russian but rather ethnic Muslims. As time went on, several of the ethnic groups in this area began to press for their autonomy from Russia. The Chechens were one of the most outspoken of these ethnic groups.

Today, the new republics comprise an area in southeast Europe called the Caucasus. Located in the northern tip of the Caucasus is Chechnya, situated in the Caucasian Mountains. Chechnya extends from west to east for about 680 miles between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. One thousand miles to the south of Moscow, the republics of Dagestan, Georgia, North Ossetia and South Ossetia surround Chechnya.

Background: The Chechen War

During the past decade, Chechnya has been ravaged by an ongoing war with Russia. The sides’ stances are highly polarized from one another and this has intensified the climate of the war. The Chechens’ efforts to gain independence stand in stark contrast to Russia’s claims of absolute sovereignty over the republic. However, these polarized standpoints have led each side to commit severe human rights abuses during the war. This has caused the conflict very difficult to understand for anyone not directly involved. Although the middle of 2000 saw a decline in the amount of large-scale military action in Chechnya, aggression from each side still causes civilians to be the victims of this unrelenting conflict. Landmines have become one of the staple weapons of the war and have been used at great lengths by both Russian and Chechen forces. Extensive use of landmines throughout the conflict has left the Chechen region a grim and bloodied place where the population struggles with this dilemma on a day-to-day basis.

Thousands of people, many of whom are children, have become refugees due to the ongoing war in Chechnya. These children have left their homes in Ingushetia and are trying to return home.
Historical Context

The conflict between Chechnya and Russia has not existed only during the past decade; the historical context of this war can be traced back more than 200 years. Throughout history, Russians have made many attempts to increase their territorial acquisitions into the Caucasus. Russia’s desire to conquer this region initiated a series of battles and ultimately led to the Crimean War (1853–56) against the inhabitants of Chechnya. The Chechens, who maintain a strong sense of identity, struggled long and hard to reclaim their freedom and independence. However, Russia’s strength prevailed, leading to the incorporation of Chechnya’s homeland and the overall annexation of Chechnya.

A rubble site in Chechnya.

In early August 1999, Chechen groups began launching Russian towns and villages as the Chechens crossed over into the neighboring republic of Dagestan. These groups dedicated their desire to bring Chechnya and Dagestan together as an independent Islamic state. This situation renewed the fighting and has led to the current situation.

Current Mine Situation

Grasping an understanding of the extent of the landmine problem in Chechnya today is difficult. While war is at hand in the Chechen republic, gathering landmine information is virtually impossible. For the most part, the information available because landmines are dispersed by both Russian and Chechen forces everyday to complicate matters, electrical communication supply and it is spreading out into other regions within the Caucasus. Chechen forces have begun to spread the mine warfare into the Dagestan territory and other border villages. Chechens have been blasting combat vehicles and checkpoints throughout the region, many landmines have not been cleared by forces over the past couple of months. Now, it is estimated that up to 100,000 hectares of arable land throughout Chechnya still need mine clearance.

Aside from this, the victim toll is difficult to number to the public. Although there are estimates on this subject written in publications such as the Landmine Monitor, the number of victims registered by Monitor reports would not give an exact picture of the situation. Zarema Mazaeva explains, “There is no institute that would deal with the given problem specially and would regularly collect information on the injured as well as the mined territories.” Nevertheless, estimates of the civilian coast are still distressing. Since the beginning of this year, it has been documented that more than 300 civilians have been injured in Chechnya by landmines according to the Russian Ministry of Health. The situation has further spread to the North Caucasus region. To paint a picture of the overall victim toll since the beginning of the war, international aid agencies claim that there are at least 10,000 mine victims in Chechnya—4,000 of which are children—that are in dire need of physical therapy, prosthetics or psychological counseling.

When there is a war taking place, a proper Level I Impact Survey could not be administered in order to collect unbiased data among children in Chechnya. These children have been injured more or less everyday to bring abundant information on the situation. Unfortunately, this clinic can only handle children that have limbs that are only damaged. Chechnya has traditionally been one of the poorest of the Soviet republics, and when one takes into consideration that a growing child needs to have his or her prostheses replaced every six months, it becomes exceedingly obvious that Chechnya needs as much help as it can get.

Current Mine Action

Aida Ailarova, an expert with the Emergency Fund (UNICEF)-funded United Nations International Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the Chechen education ministry have been working on a new course that will be added to the Chechen school curriculum. This will educate children about the various types of mines and how to move around throughout the dangerous republic. Chechen and UN agencies have been working on a new course that will be added to the Chechen school curriculum. This will educate children about the various types of mines and how to move around throughout the dangerous republic.

The World Health Organization

The World Health Organization (WHO) has put forth great efforts to continue on with its emergency assistance program for the North Caucasus region. This assistance program has been running for two years now and aims to diminish the adverse health conditions of the people affected by the conflict. According to the UNICEF report, “Health Action in the North Caucasus,” current medical needs included:

- UNICEF: alongside local non-governmental organization (NGO). Voice of the Mountains, has been conducting mine risk education presentations to citizens to reduce the effects of landmine use. Because mines are a cheap and easy method to accomplish the goals of both Chechen and Russian forces, many will be planted every day. Hundreds of civilians will continually be_uprooted by the fighting and forced to flee mine conditions, endangering a victim toll that is always on the rise. Until the fighting subsides, humanitarian de-mining will not commence. With the landmine awareness programs that have been launched in the schools, there is some hope that the many children who normally would fall victim to landmines will be well-informed of the lethal situation.

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