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Update: The Landmine Situation in Chechnya

Stemming from the ongoing war between Russian and Chechen forces, the use of anti-personnel mines throughout Chechnya continues today. As the landmine victim toll increases, much is being done in an attempt to alleviate the current state of affairs.

by Hayden Roberts, MAIC

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 southeastern part 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 this area were not Russians 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 southeastern Europe called the Caucasus. Located in the northern tip of the Caucasus is Chechnya, situated in the Caucasus 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 invaded 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, completely obscuring the reasoning that lay behind both the Chechen and Russian positions. This has made the conflict very difficult to understand for anyone not directly involved. Although the middle of 2000 saw a

Aerial view of war ravaged Chechnya; 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. The people who are affected the most are the estimated 300,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) who have been moving to refugee camps and settlements in the neighboring area of Ingushetia. Once these people reach the camps, they usually remain. The main reason for their unwillingness to leave a camp is an absence of safety, for often the IDPs are the ones who stumble upon hidden mines. Experts have claimed that Chechnya has at least half a million UXO hidden throughout its roads, forests and countryside. As Russian and Chechen groups have moved across the republic, they have often left behind these forgotten landmines.

Thousands of people, many of whom are children, have become refugees due to the ongoing war in Chechnya. Here, children who have settled in Ingushetia await the day they can return home.
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 independent Caucasian kingdoms. The Chechens, who maintained a strong sense of self-identity, struggled long and hard to reclaim their freedom and independence. However, Russia’s strength prevailed, leading to the capture of the Chechens’ homeland and the overall annihilation of Chechnya.

Historical Context

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 led to the current situation.

Current Mine Situation

Grasping an understanding of the extent of the landmine problem in Chechnya today is difficult. With the war at hand in the Chechen republic, gathering landmine information is virtually impossible. For the most part, the information available because landmines are continually used and have long-term effects on the environment.

Chechen forces have begun to spread the mine warfare into the Dagestani territory and other villages. Chechens have been blasting combat vehicles and checkpoints throughout the regions. Villagers have unearthed many landmines planted by the 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 fast becoming a number to decipher. 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 Mazukaeva explains, “There is no institute that would deal with the given problem specially and would regularly collect information on the issue as well as the mined territories.” Nevertheless, estimates of the civilian count 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 Republican Ministry on National Security and Emergencies. To paint a picture of the overall victim toll since the beginning of the war, international aid agencies agree that there are at least 10,000 mine victims in Chechnya—4,000 of which are children—that are in need of medical attention, therapy, or psychological counseling.

With this war taking place, a proper Level 1 Impact Survey could not be administered in order to determine the effects of the landmine problem. According to investigative research of Landmine Monitor, many villages in Dagestan have been contaminated with landmines throughout the region, and around Vladvikazov, which is not far from the war zone. Unfortunately, this clinic can only handle patients that it can meet. 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/hers prosthetic reflexed every six months, it becomes exceedingly obvious that Chechnya needs as much help as it can get.

Current Mine Action

Aid workers claim that little will be changed as long as the war goes on in Chechnya. Despite this, many groups and governmental organizations have been concentrating their efforts on creating new methods to raise landmine awareness and improve victim assistance. The overall bulk of mine awareness has been aimed at children and adolescents. Around Chechnya and the surrounding republics, posters, leaflets and school kits have been circulated mainly targeting the displaced children living in these regions. 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 through the dangerous republic. Chechen media and UN agencies have been involved in distributing wheelchairs, crutches, and walking sticks to mine victims as well.

The World Health Organization

The World Health Organization (WHO) has put forth great efforts to continue on with its emergency assistance program for the Chechen 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 WHO newsletter, “Health Action in the North Caucasus,” current mission efforts include:• UNICEF, alongside local non-governmental organization (NGO) Voice of the Mountains, has been conducting mine risk education presentations to women in remote villages in Ingushetia and Chechnya. These lessons on landmine education are taught to children through theater performances and other creative activities.

• In addition to landmine education, Voice of the Mountains has been working with mine/UXO victims in Chechnya for vocational training, which commenced in the beginning of June.

• WHO and the Vladikazov prosthetics workshop have agreed to expand their program of prosthetic care to Chechen adult amputees and to carry out prosthetic assistance to about 40 adult war victims. By early April, it was planned that the first group of 10 Chechen amputees would be fitted for new prosthetics.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has put forth great efforts to continue on with its emergency assistance program for the North Caucasus region. Currently, the program employed over 150 Chechen staff with integrated manual and mechanical mine clearance teams. However, as Chechnya has become more war-torn, the HALO Trust website, www.halotrust.org, was suspended. Today, mine clearance is imperative, and currently HALO Trust is aware of the chance they will be able to return and continue on with the demining program.

Conclusion

As long as the war between Russia and Chechnya grinds on, the region of the North Caucasus will constantly bear witness to the long-term 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-contaminated areas to 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.

References

2. Ibid.
3. Private e-mail correspondence from Zarema Mazukaeva. (June 20, 2002.)
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6. Supra Note 3.
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All photos from "Deadlock: Russia’s Frequent War" produced by CNN/Artiswol Media.

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A village inspect the outside of his once standing house.

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