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Chechnya

the Republic of the Wolf

by Margaret S. Busd

In a state of humanitarian crisis, Chechnya, the poorest of states within the Russian Federation, continues to strive for independence. The pre-war arsenal of landmines consisted primarily of PMN and OMZ mines. Stocks of PMN mines were moved to secret bases in the mountain regions during the war. There is also a considerable black market for landmines. The Russian army and the Chechen rebels have used landmines during the 1994-1996 war and estimates for a conventional army. Despite heavy fighting, the Chechens may continue to fight slowly, patiently and without rest until they have their freedom.

Western nations had encouraged a cease-fire, but Russia has refused, staring that a cease-fire would only allow the rebels to regroup. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright encourages Russia to seek a political solution to Chechen independence. France and Britain have hinted at the possibility of sanctions on Russia. "One cannot take a civilian population hostage, threaten to eat an entire population as terrorists, and ask us (European nations) to show understanding," said spokes-woman Catherine Colonna. The International Monetary Fund announced that the release of funds to Russia had been delayed until Russia implements legal and administrative changes.

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A Russian soldier views a territory in Chechnya from atop an APC. (Photo via Associated Press / Marc Morano)

Focus

"Why did you stay here: if you decided to stay here that means you are guerillas. This is not 1995. This time we came here with the order to sweep away everything that grows and moves. Your city is not subject to restoration, we shall level it to the ground and you together with it."

—Russian soldier to a family hiding in a Chechen basement

Chechnya to exposure. Viktor Kazantsev felt his forces had been too "tender hearted" in Chechnya. The Russian army then formulated new policies in an attempt to gain a better foothold with the rebels. Use of land air explosions, pressure on the Moscow media not to give "air time to terrorists," and the alarming new policy to round up all Chechen males between the ages of 10 and 60 are some of the Russian army's tactics to bring about resolution. Many of the Chechen males are expected to be sent to re-education camps (prison camps). Human Rights Watch has reported unspeakable acts of torture on the men and women held in these camps.

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the delay is related to the current situation in Chechnya.

Mine action funding, mine clearance and mine awareness are completely non-existent in the current state of crisis in Chechnya. The few NGOs that have operated there can only spend limited time in the area. The ICRC withdrew after the assassination of six workers in 1996. MERLIN, (Medical Emergency Relief International) did distribute mine awareness posters from 1996-1998, but withdrew later that same year.

HALO Trust withdrew in December 1999. HALO must have been one of the last NGO's operating in Chechnya. When the fighting got too severe for mine clearance work, HALO switched its efforts to moving medical supplies between hospitals and maintaining generators for the civilians. Recently, when the Russians bombarded a mine field that HALO had been clearing, three of HALO's staff were killed. "There are no distinctions between civilian and military targets. If it moves it strike it with aircraft, and if it does not move they shell it," says HALO director Guy Willoughby. Many feel that HALO was doing instrumental work in Chechnya, clearing mines and aiding in humanitarian relief efforts. The Chechens are for ever in the middle of the fighting. Many want to leave through the "safe corridors the Russians have provided. They can't trust the roads. There are numerous stories of the Russian soldiers demanding bribes and shooting locals at checkpoints. "To the north are Russian guns, to the south villages are being hit. They're afraid of becoming targets on both sides of this war," says Willoughby.

Landmine casualties and victim assistance data is not reliable. Estimates from the previous war site 800 casualties in 1996, half of which were children. 10 percent of children suffer from acute posttraumatic stress disorders as a result of landmine accidents. Victim assistance was nearly impossible prior to the current fighting. The health care system in Chechhaya was inadequate before the war because of severe shortages of equipment, medicine and water. If medical care is available, the victim must pay for any prosthetics and crutches.

Social and economic problems were and will continue to be staggering. Lack of financial support from other countries, information blackouts and the absence of humanitarian relief are all devastating to this tiny mountain country. Only a peace settlement and mutual cooperation will allow humanitarian organizations to safely begin the seemingly insurmountable task of rebuilding the lives of the Chechen people.

Currently, the situation for the Russian Rebels is dire. While multiple rocket launchers are still being fired at Grozny, the brunt of the fighting has now moved to the highlands, the last rebel stronghold. Russian forces have launched an intensive military attack in Alkhan-Kala village where there have been many rebel casualties to include prominent rebel commanders.

Western military forces have asserted that the attack on Alkhan-Kala was an ambush. The Chechens were lured there. The fighters were deliberately given a "corridor" to escape Grozny. This "corridor" was actually a mine field and several hundred rebel fighters were killed when they entered. The few dozen who successfully crossed and reached Alkhan-Kala found the Russians waiting for them.

At the beginning of the new millennium, Russia is once again faced with defining its future, as it did in the early 20th century. Former president Yeltsin, chagrined by the comments of leaders in the European Union and the United States over the aggressive assault on Chechnya, has made the comment, "They must have forgotten for a moment what Russia is. It has a full arsenal of nuclear weapons." This may be so, but there is also a rampant black market operating, severe food shortages, and republics in their federation breaking away from the motherland. While some Canadian, former military Ammunition Technicians at the team were completed by serving military staff from Italy, the United States and Denmark. Initially envisaged as a three-month mission, its success and immediate impact persuaded the