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What of Chechnya?

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The Journal of Humanitarian Demining

From the
Deputy
Director's
Desk

What of Chechnya?

Joe Lokey

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There are too many Chechen mothers crying tonight. The scene is hauntingly familiar but the truth of this particular tragedy remains shrouded behind a wall of distortion and indifference. If the inordinate amount of landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO) were the only problems, simple magic and wizardry might be a realistic and reasonable solution to the devastation that has befallen this land that once was a beautifully scenic pocket of smiles nestled in the Caucasus.

I met Maia Chovkhalova in Ottawa. She had come to this international forum to add the voice of Chechnya to the world's plea for the ban of landmines as a weapon of war. But her real message was one of awareness and focus on the tragedy in Chechnya. To an extent, it was muted by the similar stories coming from other war-ravaged countries. But Maia's pleas were unique in that they were a rarely heard voice from a hidden war. Maia is a war widow from Grozny whose home was destroyed in the war and whose husband was killed by shrapnel while fetching water. She now heads the Women's Union of North Caucasus (WUNC) and has not let the desperation of the situation dampen her passion to do something for the women and children of her country.



Chechen Flag

On December 11, 1994, over 40,000 Russian troops rolled into Chechnya. The reasons are less than clear. But war in the Caucasus never really needed a good reason. The Russian Czars began a three hundred-year effort to subjugate the Northern Caucasus in 1560. However, this latest intervention was more complicated than a simple act to establish order in a rebellious republic. The issue can be viewed cynically as one of oil and control of a pipeline that runs from Baku to Tikhoretsk. What is not in question is the carnage 24 months of fighting has left in this land-locked 17,300 square kilometers of mainly Muslim Caucasians. What is not in question are the Russian fathers and sons who will never come home. And clearly what is not in question is that more Chechens are dying as the result of what was left in their country than died during the conflict itself.

The pre-war population in Chechnya was close to a million inhabitants. In less than a year of conflict, over 50,000 civilians were killed with a

fourth of those reported to have been children. The refugees fleeing the Russian invasion were reported at 500,000 but it was extremely hard to verify because the number of displaced people fluctuated in proportion to the military activity. When a truce agreement was signed on August 25, 1996, 100,000 Chechens had perished— 10% of the pre-war population. These and other disturbing conclusions have been reached by almost every international survey, including an excellent Fact-Finding Mission by Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) in June 1997.

This tragedy has been hidden from the world and pleas for assistance come too infrequently to rise above other world issues and dilemmas. This lack of media reporting during the war meant that conventional munitions could be employed in unrestrained fashion on village after village. The Russian military routinely targeted civilian areas with excessive and indiscriminate force. The capital of Grozny was pounded ceaselessly. Entire villages now cease to exist. The consequence of the methodical elimination of villages and the subsequent area-denial procedures of the occupying army has been to leave an extremely large amount of UXO and mined areas around the country. The minefields are unmarked and unrecorded by both sides. Young children, 10-13 years of age, frequently assist in gathering scrap metal, much of which contains dangerous unexploded munitions and the hazardous debris of war.

Assistance has come slowly, if at all, to the people of Chechnya. Their need is not as well publicized as Angola, Mozambique, Cambodia or even neighboring Bosnia. No princess has come to visit, and many aid organizations couldn't find it on a map. There is a desperate need for medical equipment, medicines, and specialized orthopedic and prosthetic services. A most promising long-term solution may be Project Little Star, which is a center for psychological rehabilitation of the children of Chechnya. But this, too, is bad need of basic resources. Of the mine-related deaths in early 1997, 10 of the 14 were children. The effects on these tiny souls and their families will show for generations.

Conventional mine clearance has only begun, with HALO Trust from the UK initiating early operations and Gerbera from Germany getting under way as well. While some other clearance is done by Chechen engineers, it is done with no equipment. These mines are being detected and removed by hand, leading to heavy casualties and an indeterminate rate of clearance. There is no coordinated mine awareness effort in-country, and only Laman Az (a local youth group whose name translates "voice of the mountain") has focused on the mine problem. Laman Az has done Level 1 surveys with no training and no equipment—using only their courage and determination to succeed in regaining what was once their playgrounds, schools, hospitals and churches. With 80-90% of the water being undrinkable, TB and cholera are a significant concern, but medicines and treatment are scarce. High pollution and eco-contamination also are causing significant health problems and will be extremely costly to correct if left unaddressed for much longer.

The daily trauma being endured by the people of Chechnya is taking its

toll in the form of increased violence, drug abuse, and crime. The murder of six Red Cross workers in their sleep in December 1996 and the mysterious disappearance of humanitarian Fred Cuny, along with dozens of violent kidnappings by the Chechens themselves, have been a trumpeted warning to aid and relief organizations. Banditry, graft, and corruption also have caused security and resource concerns to be considered carefully before aid can even be discussed. The Chechen authorities have reason to suspect criminals are receiving Russian support to keep international aid and questioning eyes out of the country. These criminals are suspected of minimizing the plight and redefining Chechnya as an unfortunate internal misunderstanding.

There are no easy answers and even the tough answers aren't accepted by all. The solution to Chechnya's suffering and the remediation of the landmine and UXO problem lies in the Kremlin. Without access, freedom of movement, and flexibility to address the needs as they arise, the compounding effects of Chechnya's multiple disasters will continue to worsen. There is a balance somewhere between the right of self-determination of a people and the right of territorial integrity of states. The human suffering, however, is a transnational issue we've seen too often that transcends traditional boundaries and ties us together at the heart.

I remember Maia's eyes. If I could do more, I would. There are far more capable and competent people than me to address this issue and their reluctance to act is puzzling, disheartening and tragic. But the attempt to hide Chechnya is already failing. The real tragedy of Chechnya may be the global inaction and indifference that vividly demonstrates a darker side of humanity. The curtains of secrecy are slowly rising and the world will soon have a more balanced picture of the Chechen saga: it won't be pretty. The least we can do is tell the story.
