

WAR IN THE NORTHERN CAUCASUS

DESTRUCTION AND DEVASTATION IN CHECHNYA

«Restoring constitutional order in the 'Bandits' Republic' will take no more than a few hours...». That was what the Russian Defence Minister said when his troops were sent into Chechnya last December. Six months later, the cities of the autonomous republic are in the hands of the Russian army, but the war continues at the foot of the mountains where the Chechen fighters have dug into. About 30,000 civilians died and 5,000 Russian soldiers were killed in the fighting. Hundreds of thousands fled their homes and many towns were destroyed.

A humanitarian headache: Russian authorities and Chechen controls allow only random passage

The humanitarian versus the arbitrary

The conflict has created an extremely complex humanitarian situation. The authorities have caused a war on their own territory and have the power to block the distribution of international humanitarian aid at any time. Despite experience in former Yugoslavia or even Afghanistan, humanitarian aid workers unanimously stress the physical risks being run and the difficulty involved in planning aid in the face of a very unsettled and volatile situation, as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) representative in Nazran, Ingushetia put it.

ECHO was the first to respond to the ICRC's appeal

shortly before Christmas 1994. Appeals from Médecins sans Frontières-France and Belgium followed at the beginning of the year. These three organisations were already established in the region before the outbreak of the Chechen conflict. Since then, the Commission has closely monitored victims' needs. In February and May, ECHO organised two missions to assess needs on the ground and its partners' capacity to deliver aid where needed.

Major population movements

Almost 80% of the population of the Autonomous Republic of Chechnya (Russian federation) has been

affected by the conflict. People started leaving their homes before the outbreak of hostilities, when some 150,000 inhabitants of Russian origin fled to the north to avoid being entrapped by their own army. About 28% of the Chechen population is of Russian origin.

The capture of Grozny and subsequent shellings further to the south resulted in a massive exodus of Chechens towards the neighbouring autonomous republics, mainly Ingushetia and Dagestan, creating new humanitarian needs there.

An estimated 95% of those displaced were able to find shelter with host families. Others found refuge in public buildings. Fortunately, it was just possible to avoid creating refugee camps.

PHOTO NEWS: MACRE CHUCK



A millstone for the neighbouring republics

Ingushetia's burden is a very heavy one. Its population already included 50,000 displaced persons from Northern Ossetia. With the 130,000 Chechens who found refuge there, displaced persons represented 45% of the population of this little republic at one point. Public buildings were packed with people, forcing approximately 1,000 others to live in wagons designated as emergency shelters in the station of Nazran, where they stayed for weeks in very precarious conditions. In addition, almost 100,000 Chechens fled to Dagestan where new flows of displaced persons converged after Russian shelling in the south.

The situation changed markedly between ECHO's two successive missions. Some of those who had fled to neighbouring republics had returned to their country, though not necessarily to their native towns or villages. Movements are rapid and unpredictable depending on the fighting, demanding maximum flexibility on the part of humanitarian workers.

Priority to medical aid

The destruction of many hospitals and the blocking of medical supplies make medical aid a priority. The ICRC, MSF-F and MSF-B are supplying medical equipment and setting up dispensaries to provide treatment in the accessible areas of Chechnya and neigh-

In neighbouring Ingushetia, displaced persons swelled the population



PHOTONews: MACKIE CHUCK

bouring republics. The ICRC is also coordinating the distribution of ECHO-funded food parcels. In regions isolated by fighting, food supplies are at critical levels. Reserves for the displaced and their host families in neighbouring republics are rapidly being depleted. The supply of drinking water is a priority in Grozny, where there is no running water, and in the town of Khasavyurt in neighbouring Dagestan, where many displaced persons have gathered. With the approach of summer, the concentration of displaced populations and poor sanitation, aid workers are concentrating on the prevention of epidemics.

A humanitarian headache

On its way to provide emergency aid to 70,000 people in the village of Urus Martan to the south of Grozny, an ICRC convoy was denied passage by the forces of General Dushan Dudayev, leader of the freedom fighters,

on the grounds that the population of that village was supporting another Chechen faction. This example illustrates the many obstacles that personnel on the ground are facing. Planning is a real headache in such a changeable situation, with Russian authorities or Chechen checkpoints allowing only random passage.

Even the most experienced organisations, such as the ICRC, found it extremely difficult to remain operational during the first few months of the year. This situation explains ECHO's decision initially to support only organisations that were already well-established in the region and which had proved their operational ability on this shifting ground.

Over the next few days, the number of partners will be increased however. ECHO has just agreed to support the World Food Programme, UNICEF, the International Organisation for Migrations and the British NGO, Merlin.

EUROPE IN THE FRONT LINE IN THE CAUCASUS

The European Union is the leading aid donor to victims of the conflict in Chechnya. A total of 10.3 million ECUs has been

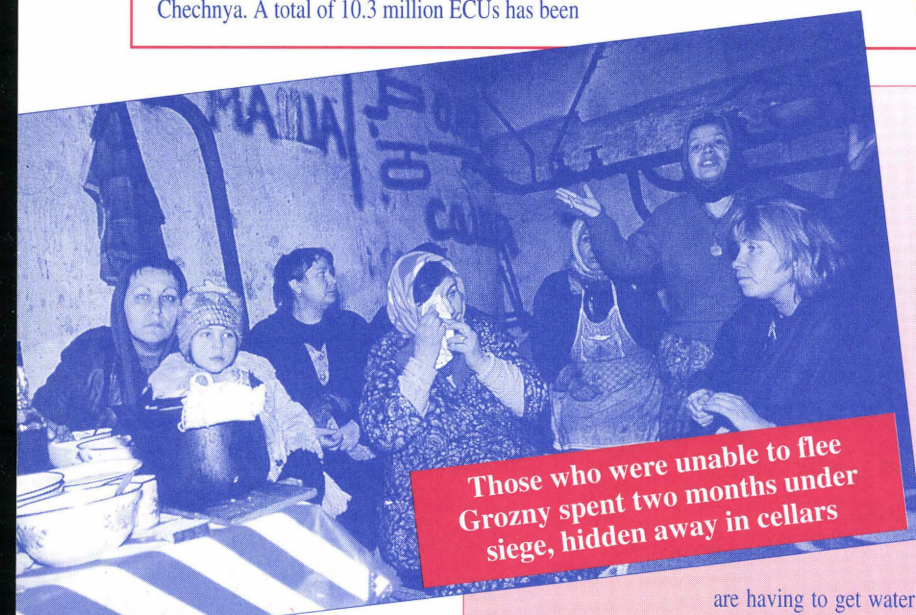
allocated to date in response to an appeal of the Red Cross family and the two MSFs (France and Belgium). A second sum of 10 million is due to be released at time of writing. The Northern Caucasus is thus being covered by European humanitarian aid, which has been extended to the three Transcaucasian Republics, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, for several years.

GROZNY rises from the rubble

Today, the centre of Grozny, which has been entirely destroyed, is dire and desolate landscape in which a few survivors wander among the rubble. Many of the city's inhabitants fled, and those who were unable to do so spent almost two months under siege, hiding in cellars, racked by cold, hunger and thirst. Almost half of those who fled the fighting have returned to the capital today. Aid workers hope to repair buildings and infrastructure away from the centre at not too great a cost. Today, there is neither running water, nor electricity, only gas has been restored. There is only one source of water at the edge of the town, with tanker transport organised by the ICRC. The current capacity is limited to two litres per person, far from enough in summer. «People

Those who were unable to flee Grozny spent two months under siege, hidden away in cellars

are having to get water from puddles in order to drink», explains Dr Alain Devaux of MSF. Although Grozny seems calm during the day, as soon as night falls, when Russian soldiers are entrenched in their bunkers, shots ring out throughout town...



PHOTONews: NOEL OUIDOU



ECHO's global reach

CENTRAL ASIAN REPUBLICS

The European Union is continuing to support the people of this region, suffering the effects of civil wars and economic paralysis, through its humanitarian action.

TADZHIKISTAN

Hardship is hitting the whole of the country. Dispensaries and hospital services are no exception. Use of the same syringe for several patients and surgical operations without anaesthesia have become standard practice. Infectious diseases are reappearing and the infant mortality rate continues to rise. Faced with this medical emergency, ECHO gave 2.2 million ECUs for medicines and supplies for hospitals throughout the country.

Shelter for those who have fled the battle zones of Tadjhikistan: that is the objective of a housing reconstruction programme financed by ECHO. Many houses have been destroyed by the fighting, especially in the south of the country. The reconstruction project is part of a programme started by the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in order to help those returning to their homes, with the aim of stabilising the region. The capital, Dushanbe, and its surrounding areas have taken in some 20,000 displaced persons, partially cared for by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and ECHO is financing the supply of food parcels, clothing and blankets.

Apart from these two programmes, ECHO is supplying emergency food aid to those in need, 600,000 people across the whole of the country. Since the beginning of 1995, ECHO has dedicated 8.2 million ECUs to humanitarian aid for the Tadjhik people.

AZERBAIJAN

Living conditions continue to deteriorate in the republic, which is suffering from the joint effects of the conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh and the collapse of the former Soviet Union. Sixty per cent of the population is living below the poverty line. One out of every seven is a refugee or displaced person. About 70,000 people are living in tents in a region exposed to extreme weather conditions. ECHO is supporting a wide variety of projects to improve the situation of those most affected. These projects include the distribution of clothing,

heating oil, the supply of shelters, medical and sanitary assistance and water, and urgent repairs to hospitals and health centres. Since the beginning of 1995, projects supported by ECHO have totalled some 10 million ECUs.

ANGOLA

HOPE RETURNS

Two former enemies, the guerrilla Jonas Savimbi and the president Jose Eduardo Dos Santos, embraced on May 6, 1995 in a gesture that ratified the peace plan signed in Lusaka in November 1994. The two camps have committed themselves to speeding up the peace process, bringing an end to 20 years of civil war. But the improvement in the political climate offers no immediate solution to Angola's huge humanitarian needs. The country is peppered with mines, delaying the return of displaced populations and the distribution of aid to many places. Humanitarian workers hope they will be able to reach previously inaccessible regions soon. On May 12 1995, ECHO allocated 7 million ECUs for the continuation of a large-scale medical and health programme to help displaced populations who are victims of the conflict. This programme provides for the distribution of medicines and medical equipment, the rehabilitation of hospitals and health centres, health care and the production of artificial limbs for victims of landmines. Eighteen NGOs are leading these different projects in extremely difficult working conditions.

PERU

RABIES AND PLAGUE ARE REAPPEARING

An epidemic of the plague has broken out in Peru, an indication of extreme poverty and poor sanitary conditions. The conflict between Peru and Ecuador is aggravating the situation. About 122 villages are currently affected and the threat of infection is hanging over more than four million people. ECHO is working in collaboration with the Pan American Health Association (PAHO) to offer treatment to the sick and to check the epidemic by means of preventive measures such as insecticides. In the Peruvian jungle, vampire bats are spreading rabies. As with the plague, the conflict between Peru and Ecuador has exacerbated the spread of this disease. Vampire bats have attacked soldiers fighting in this normally sparsely-populated part of the country. The number of people threatened by rabies is estimated at 30,000, including 8,000 children. ECHO is supporting the action of an Italian NGO (Istituto per la Cooperazione Universitaria) to check the epidemic through a campaign of vaccination, treatment and information on what precautions to take to avoid being bitten. In total, ECHO has devoted 750,000 ECUs to help fight these two diseases.



ASOCIACION NAVARRA - NUEVO FUTURO

Over 4 million Peruvians are threatened with infection by the plague

ZAIRE

EBOLA: DEADLY VIRUS

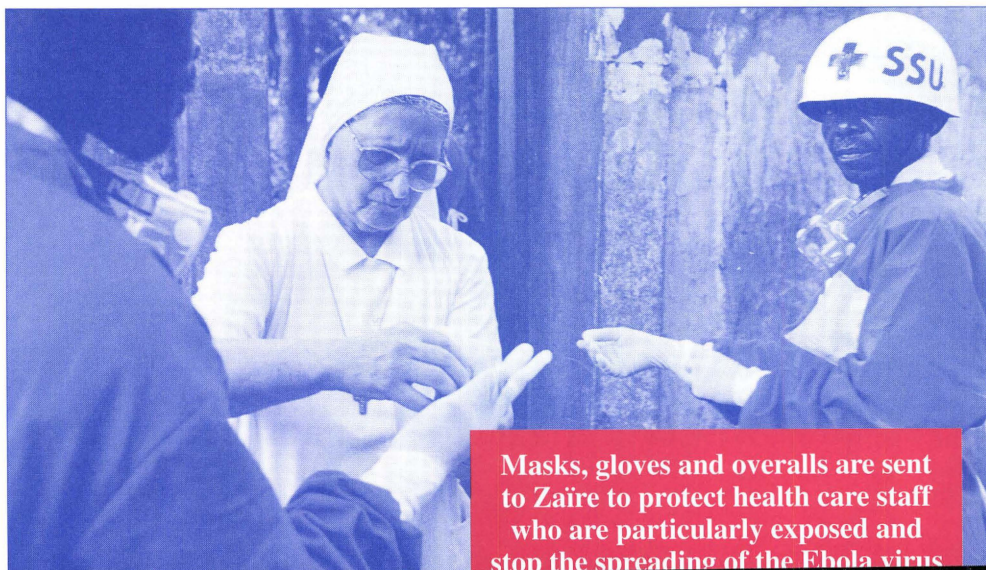
The Commission has reacted rapidly, supporting an emergency action in Zaïre to contain an epidemic of the deadly Ebola virus which broke out in the city of Kikwit.

This contagious viral infection is transmitted by contact with the patient's body fluids, and causes internal haemorrhaging, leading to death in nine out of ten cases.

Without vaccination or medication, the spread of the epidemic can be avoided only by quarantining patients, isolating affected villages, educating the population about personal hygiene measures and protecting health care workers, who are particularly vulnerable. The situation has been compounded by the

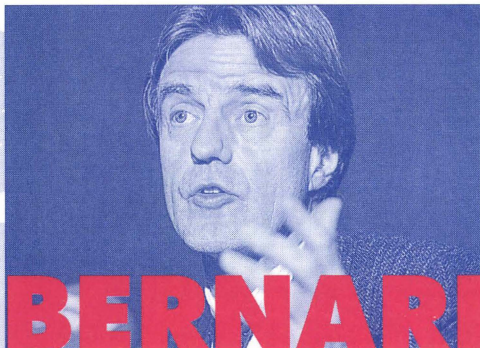
recent outbreak of a dysentery epidemic in the same region. ECHO is supporting Médecins sans Frontières

(B), which has sent staff and 4.5 tons of medical equipment to the area for local health care workers.



PHOTONews - CHRISTOPHE CALAIS

Masks, gloves and overalls are sent to Zaïre to protect health care staff who are particularly exposed and stop the spreading of the Ebola virus



PHOTONews: BEL 001193

'Conflict prevention is being developed within the European Union'

BERNARD KOUCHNER

President of the European Parliament Development Commission

Today, conflict prevention is at the centre of the concerns of those working in the humanitarian field. What is the link between humanitarian action and preventive diplomacy?

In France, with the assistance of NGOs, diplomacy and the government, we have perfected the humanitarian tool. We have moved on from the first - neutral - generation of humanitarian aid, which acts on government authorisation - to a second generation, which continues to respect state sovereignties but, at the same time, puts people first. This new approach to humanitarian aid, sanctioned by the United Nations, makes it possible to take the risk of acting in response to appeals from victims, even if authorisation has not been given by the relevant government. The third stage, which is still imperfect and faltering, will involve the international community assuming responsibility for conflict prevention. This is being developed within the European Union, in the European Parliament Development and Foreign Affairs Commission and, in particular, in the Forum for the active prevention of conflicts that we have created. The aim is to develop legislation which would enable the international community to invite the protagonists of a conflict to meet around a table in an attempt to settle their differences by diplomatic means, instead of waiting for images of tragedy before sending humanitarian aid. When it does become indispensable, sending aid is always a political failure as we

see it. Not only is it very expensive but it is also insufficient to meet the immense needs of the victims.

What stage are you at today?

Although the idea of prevention has made headway, today it is the instrument that is missing. It's not even a matter of political awareness any more. Mrs Bonino talks of continuous prevention. Manuel Marin told Parliament: «I am in favour of the right to interfere.» But parliamentary resolutions in favour of Rwanda or the former Yugoslavia are not implemented, or are not implemented until much later. We therefore have to devise an instrument that will make it possible to implement them. What is clear is that prevention can be achieved only through information. What people don't see in the Southern Sudan or Liberia arouses no indignation and, therefore, does not exert pressure for intervention. On the other hand, the images of Somalia are shameful. As far as warning systems are concerned, they do exist. If we read the Amnesty International report, we know what is happening in those countries where there are no cameras. The big problem lies in listening to appeals and turning them into political responses.

An instrument for intervention therefore has to be put in place and this will be done through the combined efforts of the United Nations and the European Union. One day, we will have an international army of human rights, I am sure of it. We will

change the world through the right to interfere and we will avoid massacres, but I don't know how yet.

A «humanitarian day» is being held in Paris on June 8 within the context of the French Presidency. What, in your view, is the specific nature of French NGOs?

It is mainly medical, which quite naturally means that it prevents rather than cures... By inventing humanitarian interference, the second generation of French Doctors has, as it were, pioneered the vaccination after the antibiotics.

What is your assessment of the humanitarian action led by the European Union?

In my view excellent but invisible. ECHO is too often seen as a mere sponsor by organisations working on the ground. They are very egotistical in their self-promotion and not very inclined to fly the European flag. ECHO will have to be very combative, very determined, very motivated and very visible in its work.

I wish it all the best. European citizens should know about this work and be proud of this good side of the Union. I was very troubled the other day when a man asked me, «What should I say to my children when they ask me how we allowed the massacre of Bosnia?» I would tell them, «The European Union was not yet grown-up enough».

Interview by Isabelle Brusselmans for ECHONEWS

Humanitarian day in Paris

French Presidency hosts event

The European Union's second «Humanitarian Day» took place in Paris on June 8 1995, in the context of events linked to the French Presidency of the European Council. On this occasion, Emma Bonino, Commissioner responsible for humanitarian aid, opened a photographic exhibition presenting the work of ECHO and French NGOs, at la Grande Arche de la Défense. France, the birthplace

of «no-frontierism», is one of the countries at the forefront of humanitarian action. French NGOs have been working in close collaboration with ECHO from the start, all over the world. On June 7, French NGOs and Médecins du Monde International organised a conference entitled «Preventive diplomacy and humanitarian action».



PHOTONews: DIDIER LEBRUN

'Psychosocial projects must be part of humanitarian aid'

DANIELLE MITTERRAND

President of France-Libertés

France-Libertés, your foundation, is leading various projects of a psychosocial nature for people affected by conflict. What is the specific nature of these projects in the context of humanitarian aid?

Projects of a psychosocial nature are more concerned with the environment of the victims of a conflict or precarious situation. At a time when the discussion is focused on conflict prevention, these kinds of projects help us to manage situations of tension on a level which is, admittedly, more individual but just as important. They are an indispensable element in rehabilitating victims and in helping them to rediscover a few basic elements of their devastated life. For example, restoring the school environment helps children to live again in the setting of the school and to rediscover a

balance which has often been lost, even if the war goes on. When we decided to develop projects to restore schools in Iraqi Kurdistan, our objective was, first and foremost, to protect the children from the cold and to feed them. But it meant giving schoolchildren traumatised by the war and displaced by the exodus a chance to rediscover their sense of citizenship by learning what everyone should know of their history, literature and the knowledge essential to leading a full life. At a time when the traumatic after-effects of war are increasing, this kind of setting can help victims to cope with the tragedies they have experienced. These projects often provide a back-up to food distribution or health programmes. I hope they will continue to be funded and that they will form an integral part of a set of objectives to be achieved in conflict situations.

What are the main characteristics of France-Libertés' activities?

Since its creation, France-Libertés has often combined humanitarian aid with protection of human rights or support for democracy. Most of the projects financed by ECHO have been in regions where we had already investigated the human rights situation and supported local partners. Whenever a conflict, disaster or precarious situation arose in areas where we were working, ECHO made it possible to finance rehabilitation and humanitarian aid programmes already underway. The types of aid that we would like to concentrate on in future will remain in the field of prevention and rehabilitation in conflict zones, with our priorities mainly focused on eyewitness accounts and appeals received on a daily basis.

Interview by Isabelle Brusselmans for ECHONEWS