

## **Chechnya: War Profiteers Exploit Disabled**

**Author:** [Aminat Abumuslimova](#)

Chechen amputees fear corruption is preventing them from getting artificial limbs.

As usual, the Khasavyurt-Argun taxi stand is boisterous. Taxi drivers rush about searching for clients, stopping passers-by. But one of the drivers sits impassively at the wheel of his old Oka car – a tiny, boxy Soviet relic with hand controls which the state once produced especially for handicapped people.

Ruslan Batalov is a former member of the Chechen government's special-purpose police detachment. He was disabled on the night of November 9, 2001, when his hometown of Argun was heavily shelled. Of five people who rushed during a lull in the bombardment to put out a fire in a neighbour's cattle shed, Ruslan was the only one to survive. He lost both of his legs.

The Chechen government now lists 52,000 war invalids, including 1,500 amputees, like Ruslan. The ministry of labour and social development says even this figure is incomplete because of mass migration out of Chechnya.

One reason many amputees leave – apart from the generally grim state of life in Chechnya – is because many of them cannot get artificial limbs here. Many are forced to travel to other Russian regions or go abroad instead.

"Who knows, had I behaved like others then, I could have already had my own 'legs,'" said Ruslan. "Not so long ago, I spoke with a fellow traveller who had gone to Germany for prosthetics. Had he not told me himself, I would not have known his legs were artificial. They seemed so natural. His legs too, like mine, were amputated almost up to the thighs."

Corruption and war profiteering – a fact of life in Chechnya – are serious factors preventing people like Ruslan from getting artificial limbs.

According to Khaspi Khasiev, head of the Chechen health department's division responsible for prosthetics and rehabilitation, shady local middlemen have carved out a niche in the amputee business. Khasiev says they have pocketed cash intended to help amputees.

"The problem is that too many organisations that undertake to help handicapped and amputees of late have emerged," said Khasiev. "Only those who are too lazy are not making a profit out of invalids in our republic."

Khasiev stressed that he did not mean international agencies. "Of course, I do not mean the Red Cross, UNICEF or organisations like them here," he said.

"There are plenty of various mediators here that approach humanitarian organisations on behalf of invalids and receive immense sums to help them. However, they are thinking about their own enrichment, not invalids."

Some officials in Chechnya say that recent changes to Russia's social welfare system have created more problems. Arbi Nukayev, the current head of the Grozny enterprise for prosthetics and orthopaedics, says

the Federal Social Insurance Fund has not transferred a single rouble to the centre lately.

"Our problem is that we are unable to carry out complicated prosthetics and we do not have our own hospital," said Nukayev.

Masud Kherikhanov, chief specialist of the department for rehabilitation of invalids with the ministry of labour and social development of the Chechen Republic, said a lack of facilities for post-amputation care means that even those who do get artificial limbs encounter serious problems afterwards.

All that Ruslan Batalov knows is that four years have passed since he lost his legs, and that the Grozny prosthetics centre has still not helped him. He suspects someone has pocketed the cash intended to make his new legs.

"My wife has been massaging me for four years now and she's exhausted. I have no money to pay masseurs. I think all this could have been avoided had they made a pair of good artificial limbs with the money allocated for me. It is quite possible that someone is making money on this," he said.

Aminat Abumuslimova is a reporter for Groznensky Rabochy newspaper in Grozny.

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