

Dogs of War in Chechnya

Author: [Amina Visayeva](#)

A new threat in Chechnya – this time from wild dogs and other animals, some carrying rabies.

In June, 16-year-old Ruslan Magomadov was attacked and badly bitten by a stray dog in the yard of his own house in the Chechen town of Shali. Three weeks later, he died of rabies from multiple bites on the chin, neck and wrist.

The next day, Islam Ibragimov, who was only five, died in the nearby village of Novye Atagi. The boy had been attacked by a rabid dog 16 days earlier.

Years of conflict in Chechnya have resulted in an animals on the loose, some of them dangerous. Now officials are warning that they pose a major health risk to the republic.

Saidulla Alkhanov, who heads Zhilkomtrans, an office responsible for controlling the population of stray animals, told IWPR that his office estimates there are between 14,000 and 15,000 stray dogs in Grozny alone. In Chechnya as a whole, there are an estimated 500,000 and 600,000 wild dogs, and the number is growing day by day.

More and more Chechens are falling victim to attacks by animals. The Hygiene and Epidemic Control Centre at the Healthcare Office of Chechnya has reported 503 instances of humans attacked and bitten by stray dogs during the first six months of 2005, far higher than the 140 reported in the same period last year.

Years of fighting between government troops and Chechen rebels have left domestic pets homeless, and driven wild animals from their natural habitats. Both feral and truly wild animals have become more aggressive towards humans.

Statistics also indicate a sharp increase in the number of deaths caused by dogs, cats and foxes infected with rabies, and doctors are worried that the disease could run out of control.

Last year, Magomed Arsaliev, a 12-year-old school student in Grozny, was bitten on the leg by a dog in broad daylight. His mother took him to their neighbourhood outpatient clinic immediately, but the doctors were unable to save the boy, who died three months later. Last summer, an Alhan-Kala resident was attacked by a fox at the edge of the forest. He died two months later. In both cases, the animals were rabid.

After war first broke out in Chechnya in 1994, with no other food available, dogs had no choice but to feed on the human corpses covering the streets of besieged Grozny. Such dogs were often killed by combatants on both sides.

“People fleeing the first Chechen war left their dogs behind. Left on their own, they have been breeding uncontrollably,” said Alkhanov.

More domestic animals were displaced by the second campaign of 1999-2000. Packs of wild dogs have become a common feature in Grozny, posing a particular danger to children.

In autumn 1999, as the bombing and shelling began to hit wooded, mountainous areas, wild animals migrated en masse down to the plains, closer to human habitation.

In some cases they escaped to other parts of Russia. Hunters and villagers say that in 1999 and 2000, wolves, bears, foxes and other creatures fled in large numbers across mountain passes to neighbouring Dagestan. In the summer of 2002, packs of wolves believed to be from Chechnya were spotted in the Rostov region, more than 400 kilometres away.

But the biggest dangers are nearer home, inside Chechnya.

“There is very little we can do,” said Alkhanov. “We only have two vehicles equipped for impounding stray dogs, but we would need eight of those for the whole city, two for every district. And we need 44 more to cover Chechnya’s 22 rural areas – that’s 52 for the whole republic including Grozny. But we have just two.”

Alkhanov said a staff of 90 was needed to contain the problem, but he had 30 people working in his office. When his team raided Shali, the dogs simply moved on to the town of Argun, eluding a cross-country chase.

The two boys, Magomadov and Ibragimov, both died because they had not been vaccinated.

Tamara Avtakhonova of the Hygiene and Epidemic Control Centre told IWPR, “We received 500 doses of anti-rabies vaccine in May. At the time Magomadov and Ibragimov were infected, there was no shortage of vaccine anywhere in Chechnya, including the Shali district. The local medics just needed to find it, but they never bothered. That was a bad case of negligence.”

Sometimes it seems that domestic animals have better access to anti-rabies vaccination than humans. Vakha Barsukov, deputy head of Chechnya’s Veterinary Office, says that whenever an outbreak is identified, his staff “go around vaccinating domestic animals while doctors vaccinate the people”.

Amina Visayeva is a reporter for Vecherny Grozny newspaper in Chechnya.

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