

From Chechnya to Karabakh

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Nurses hope to transfer skills learned in one war-torn region to their own homeland.

In a pioneering collaboration, two nurses from Chechnya are learning how victims of war are helped to recover in Nagorny Karabakh, so that they can apply these new skills when they return to their war-torn homeland.

The two women, Madina Alkhanova and Louisa Dagieva, both aged 25, have come to Karabakh under a Chechen health ministry scheme funded by the United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF.

Having worked in different hospitals in Grozny, the women can talk from experience about how Chechnya's public health system is in crisis, with little help available for the victims of war.

The joint project – bridging two parts of the Caucasus that are very remote from one another – came about thanks to Vardan Tadevosian, director of the rehabilitation centre that has been operating for six years in Stepanakert, Karabakh's capital. In November 2002, he spoke about his centre's work when he attended a seminar in Vladikavkaz organised by the Caucasus Forum, a network of non-governmental organisations. A year later, participants in the seminar went to Karabakh to see the centre for themselves.

In autumn 2003, Tadevosian met an official from the Chechen health ministry who spotted the need for a similar rehabilitation centre in Chechnya, where the legacy of two conflicts has left thousands of people wounded and disabled.

That meeting resulted in the nurses' working visit to Karabakh, where they are in the second month of a half-year course, studying alongside local students.

The centre was opened in September 1998, with assistance from the international group Christian Solidarity Worldwide, and aims to treating victims of the 1991-94 war between Azerbaijanis and Armenians, and integrating them back into society.

In 2002, the centre was brought under the Karabakh health ministry. As well as arranging treatment, it trains patients in skills such as wood carving, computer technology, needlework, music, drawing and English.

The two Chechens admit they were cautious about coming to a place which is overwhelmingly Christian.

"To be honest, some of our relatives and close friends were afraid for us and tried to talk us out of it," said Alkhanova. "They said, 'You are Muslims and they are Christians, nothing will come of it.' But we were sure it was all just prejudice.

"We feel very much at home in Stepanakert. We have a lot in common with the Karabakhis, they have many comparable or similar traditions and customs."

Both women say they have good memories of the Armenian neighbours they once had in Grozny.

Alkhanova says they have been well treated in Karabakh, and describes the people who work at the rehabilitation centre as “like gold”.

Previously, the women knew little about Karabakh, except that it went through a terrible war, so they were surprised to see virtually no traces of destruction left in Stepanakert. They are still optimistic that Chechnya can revive and go back to a normal existence.

“There are many people in Chechnya who have suffered because of the war,” said Dagieva with undisguised pain.

“Almost every day there are explosions, new victims and casualties, and many disabled people. Of course, not all of them have an opportunity to travel abroad for treatment, which is why it is necessary to help people in situ, so that they don’t feel they are a burden to themselves and to those around them. That’s why our republic needs a rehabilitation centre.”

The two nurses said they intend to begin work establishing such a clinic in Chechnya immediately they return home.

“We ourselves have learnt a lot from these women,” said Tadevosian. “We have much in common as well as many differences. We have enjoyed getting to know their traditions and customs. I think our collaboration will continue even after the end of the present programme.”

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Location: Caucasus
Stavropol
South Ossetia
North Ossetia

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/from-chechnya-karabakh>