

Little Help for Chechnya's Disabled

Author: [Timur Aliev](#)

Thousands of people injured by Chechen wars find that life is a struggle for the disabled.

Ruslan Nurayev moves around the courtyard of his house in a wheelchair. He is small, a bit overweight and smokes a lot. His mood swings from cheerfulness to anger.

Nine years of violence and war in Chechnya has produced a lot of people like Nurayev, whose body and mind have been scarred forever by the conflict.

Until the current war began in 1999, he had a good job as manager of a construction yard that brought in a more than decent salary.

Then in the autumn his family house in Grozny was damaged by an air raid. Nurayev climbed up onto the roof to mend it but was caught in an artillery barrage in which a small piece of shrapnel pierced his spine, leaving him paralysed.

No more job, and the 1,700 roubles (about 55 dollars) monthly pension he now receives as a "second group invalid" is not even enough to cover the cost of his medicine.

From being the family breadwinner he must now depend on his children for both personal care and money.

People disabled by shells, bullets, mines and bombs can be found in their thousands throughout Chechnya, struggling to survive. Of the 33,000 people officially registered as disabled by Chechnya's Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare - out of a total population of 1.1 million - most are of working age and another 7,500 of them children.

Chechnya's Society of Invalids, the largest group defending the rights of the disabled in the republic, operates from an office in a semi-ruined building in central Grozny.

Society head Rabu Azdayeva told IWPR that life is tough for their 15,000 members on small pensions. "As they are not getting either free healthcare or medicine, this money is not enough to provide them with food, toiletries, clothes, basic products," she said.

The society is having trouble helping, as much of its income used to be generated by a small network of businesses and shops which have been destroyed.

And it is no good looking to local government.

"In 2002 we were promised a one-off grant of 400,000 roubles (13,000 dollars) to get the organisation back on its feet, but the money never materialised," says Azdayeva.

Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare aide Imran Iriskhanov concedes that last year's budget of 34 million

roubles (about 1.1 million dollars) to help the disabled was not nearly enough, but said it was simply not possible to redraw priorities at this stage.

"The allocations for buying coal for regions without gas and procuring prosthetic limbs are well-provided for, but there is clearly not enough money for wheelchairs or sanatorium places. It's not possible to reallocate money from one article of the budget to another."

Instead it is international organisations that shoulder the burden. Dr Ute Enderlein, Public Health Officer for the North Caucasus with the World Health Organisation, WHO, says responsibilities have been divided up between the various agencies. Her organisation, UNICEF and various partners are dealing with young disabled people under 21, while the International Committee of the Red Cross look after the adults.

Altogether the WHO centre in Vladikavkaz has fitted 400 false limbs, mostly legs, to Chechens in the last three years. Handicap International, a WHO partner, has provided limbs for another 300 people, while a new orthopaedic centre set up by the Red Cross in Grozny in April plans to treat another 100 more every year.

Even so, one Chechen non-government organisation, Laman Az, estimates that there are 2,500 untreated victims of mines and unexploded shells.

Then there are the demands for bribes. Azdayeva says she hears a lot of complaints about disabled people being forced to pay up to get registered.

"Starting with laboratory tests and ending with the doctor's commission, they end up paying up to 3,000 roubles (100 dollars). That's a big sum for a disabled person."

Nurayev, who cannot walk, said that he was given only "category two" disabled status because he could not afford to pay more.

Rustam Bakhmataliev, a former weight-lifter with a knee injury, says he received an offer for his disabled status to be moved up from category three to two in exchange for a bribe of 6,000 rubles - but he refused.

"I imagined myself queuing for my benefit payment and I felt ashamed," he said.

Timur Aliev is a frequent IWPR contributor based in Nazran, Ingushetia.

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