The North Caucasus: Working for Peace and Healing

Davin Bremner, Leonora Lowe and Maksim Shevelev work for International Alert*, a non-governmental organisation committed to the just and peaceful transformation of violent conflicts.

Roswitha Jarman is a counselling psychologist working on healing after violence, and particularly with traumatised children, among Chechen refugees in Ingushetia.

Davin Bremner

In the world today the current version of the medieval 'Flat Earth' theory is 'Realpolitik'. Everything is understood to be about power. But in Chechnya and similar places this assumption is not solving the problem. International Alert is engaged in trying to prove to people that the Earth is in fact round.

My own experience is in Georgia, in the South Caucasus. Here the conflicts with Abkhazia and Ossetia are stuck: conventional methods are not going to solve them.

What International Alert usually tries to do is to create safe spaces for dialogue which have the backing of respected institutions like the church or trusted individuals like Nelson Mandela. In Georgia the task is to promote discussion on what relations between the regions and the central government should ideally be like and to allay the Georgian authorities' fears that their country is going to break up. Over the next year International Alert will be running 10-12 workshops in Georgia with these aims in view.

* International Alert, 1 Glyn St, London SE11 5HT. Telephone: 020 7793 8383; fax: 020 7793 7975; email: general@international-alert.org

Leonora Lowe

I too spent three years in Georgia before coming to International Alert. I also worked in Ingushetia, in the North Caucasus, in 1996.

In the early 1990s there were high hopes in the West that lines of communication to the newly-independent South Caucasus states of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan would begin to run East-West rather than North-South. There were obvious geopolitical reasons for this: the prospect of oil and new pipelines. Hence there was Western interest in achieving stability in the region. In 1993 Shevardnadze was invited back to Georgia to quell the civil war. He has a high reputation in the West. There was a huge sense of hope in Georgia when I moved there in 1996. But now the mood there is quite depressed. The five-year honeymoon of Georgia feeling that it is a Western country is over. Georgia now realises that even though the Soviet Union is

no more, it is vulnerable to Russia. And one of the main factors here is the instability in the North Caucasus, where the small republics are part of the Russian Federation. So for example Russia accuses Georgia of sheltering Chechen rebels who cross the mountains. This vulnerability holds back the introduction of social services at an indigenous level which was foreseen by Western aid programmes.

Even so, it is relatively easy to get humanitarian aid into the three independent republics of the South Caucasus - Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan - in comparison to the situation in the North Caucasus, where it is becoming increasingly difficult to do so. Between 1995 and 1998 28 aid workers were killed in Ingushetia. At the same time there is widespread corruption, and there is also widespread obstruction of aid by the Russian authorities when it suits their political aims in the area.

Maksim Shevelev

I have worked in conflict prevention and resolution all over the Caucasus.

The Chechens are the one North Caucasus nation which had never stopped trying to win independence from Russia. The situation there has become more difficult over the past year. The Russian government promised to end its antiterrorist campaign, but this has not yet happened. Refugees are proliferating, as is guerrilla activity. The Russian authorities do not have a well-structured plan to solve this problem; and they are not ready to start negotiations with Chechen representatives.

The war in Chechnya is the most obvious conflict in the North Caucasus; but there are many others, actual and potential. In many places the problems are of Stalin's making. It was his policy to 'divide and rule' ethnic groups by splitting related groups and combining unrelated groups. In the republic of Karachayevo-Cherkessia, for example, there is tension between the two main ethnic groups, the Cherkess and the Karachai. The Cherkess are related to the Kabardinians and the Adygei, who live in separate republics in the North Caucasus, and the Karachai are very close to the Balkars, who in turn share a republic with the Kabardinians. Any conflict is thus likely to spill over into these neighbouring republics as well. There is ethnic tension between North Ossetia and Ingushetia: there was a flareup in 1992, and the conflict is suspended but not solved. Meanwhile in Dagestan, a republic perhaps unique in the world in that it is home to more than 40 small ethnic groups, and where there is also high overpopulation and unemployment, tension was made worse in late 1999 when Chechens invaded some areas with the aim of setting up a combined Islamic state.

Conflicts in the North Caucasus have to be tackled not only by governments but by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working to build civil society. Some three years ago, in the framework of its Georgia-Abkhazia project, International Alert set up a Caucasus NGO Forum to try to build confidence between different ethnic groups in the region, and to provide support for joint civil projects all round the Caucasus. Some 50 local NGOs are now involved. A coordination secretariat was set up - I was its secretary from May 1999 to May 2000 - but the emphasis is on encouraging local people to take their own initiatives with humanitarian projects to help to solve conflicts and build confidence. In summer 1999, for example, ex-combatants from different parts of the Caucasus were invited to a meeting in Nalchik, where the Forum

is located, to discuss how they could work for conflict resolution in their own areas. The next step was for them to organise teams of ex-combatants to deliver humanitarian aid to Chechnya and Ingushetia. These are brave and experienced men who will be likely to be able to cope with the responsibility involved. Another example: in autumn 1999 some Forum members organised a factfinding trip to Karachayevo-Cherkessia where they met representatives of all parties involved in the tension there. The resulting report was distributed internationally. Another example: last summer the Forum organised a mission to inspire local people in Abkhazia to collect goods and money and send humanitarian aid to Chechen refugees. The average salary in Abkhazia is around one dollar a month, but some five tons of goods and food were collected and were delivered by local forum members to Chechen refugee camps in Ingushetia. And most recently the Forum has undertaken a factfinding mission to find out the truth about Chechen refugees crossing the mountains into Georgia.

Discussion

One participant asked whether religious believers or religious organisations were involved to any extent in all this.

Mark Oxbrow of Church Mission Society replied from his own experience. Both main faith groups, Christian and Muslim, were growing in the South Caucasus. The Georgian Orthodox Church was developing its monastic life and was working with refugees. The Baptist Church was also growing. In the North Caucasus he did not see a similar revival of the Orthodox Church, but again there was a steady growth of evangelical and Protestant churches, albeit from a very small base (there are only six Protestant churches in Dagestan, for example). He was impressed by the extent to which these churches were involved in their own aid campaigns, without any connection with foreign organisations. In the North Caucasus he had noticed a phenomenon typical of Russia as a whole: a lack of coordination between groups doing the same kind of work. He was therefore very interested to hear about the Forum.

Maksim said that there was only one faith-based NGO working with the Forum: Chris Hunter's peacemaking group.* Perhaps this was because most of the NGOs in the Forum were working in the field of conflict resolution and human rights, and it might be that faith-based groups were more involved in humanitarian aid.

Mark asked whether the Forum would find it difficult to work with faith groups which had a mixed agenda. In Dagestan, for example, there were Islamic groups, such as the Wahhabis, which distributed humanitarian aid but also had a spiritual agenda, and this had led to the Dagestani authorities clamping down on them.

Davin said that in his experience bringing in controversial groups with complex agendas could be beneficial and lead to a dynamic. The Forum would therefore probably welcome such groups. But in general, as far as faith-based groups were concerned, he had a basic question to ask: do they have a concept of civil society and of how to build it? It was clear, for example, that a fundamentalist Islamic understanding of society would be quite different from a Christian understanding.

** Chris Hunter, The Centre for Peacemaking and Community Development (CPCD). CPCD works mainly in the North Caucasus but has centres in Moscow and all over Russia. It is mainly concerned with human rights issues and with community development. Email: HunterChris[at]compuserve.com&*

Roswitha Jarman

I work with Chechen refugees in Ingushetia in the North Caucasus which I have regularly visited since 1991 to work in schools and universities on issues of creative conflict resolution. I was able to travel about quite freely until 1997; now however it is dangerous to do this, and I am taken round by my friends.

There are a few positive signs in Chechnya, but life for most people is grim and very frightening. In some places the Russian administrator restrains himself as long as he is paid bribes; in other villages there is cooperation between the Chechens and the Russian authorities. In the refugee camps I have not met anyone who supports the fighters, although there are some. Horrific things are going on in Chechnya, mainly from the Russian side. It is as though human beings have gone over the brink. Everyone lives with the fear of experiencing arbitrary violence at any time. People living in Chechnya say 'We're not living, we're only existing'. The refugees living in camps outside are afraid to return.

The Caucasian peoples have an innate dignity, which has not been broken despite their sufferings. They learn their dances from childhood and are retaining the beauty and dignity of their traditions. We can be a witness to this beauty and to their spiritual strength, and thereby affirm their dignity and sense of self-worth.

The psycho-social rehabilitation work I am involved in started in 1995 on the initiative of a Chechen living in Holland, a paediatrician from Grozny, and with financial support from Dutch Interchurch Aid. It is now a locally-owned NGO called 'Denal', which means 'Dignity' in the Chechen language.

Since 1995 Denal has built up a good team of non-experts, now well skilled at working with trauma on a grassroots level. They are networking closely with other organisations doing this kind of work, for example with Chris Hunter's organisation CPCD (see note above) which was also set up in 1995. Denal staff work closely with teachers in schools and with medical professionals. In the refugee camps Denal has set up resource centres and medical services, and there are tents for group and individual counselling work, dance and sport. Denal also provides some humanitarian aid, although this isn't its major focus.

As well as psychosomatic healing, the task of the counsellors is also in rebuilding community. In the groups children and young people learn how to cooperate, how to make democratic decisions and how to make a positive contribution to the community.

In the healing process it is good to help people make links between what they are now and what they were before the disastrous event. People need to re-find their identity: what kind of person am I, what can I become, and how do I fit into my community as it is now? Knowing ourselves is a vital part of our spiritual journey.

Discussion

Mark Oxbrow said that CMS was planning to support the publication of a history of Christianity in Dagestan from the 6th to 12th centuries, by a Dagestani author, with two forewords by a leading Christian and a leading Muslim.

Lord Frank Judd spoke about his work in the Council of Europe where he is involved in trying to get the Russian authorities and the Duma to recognise and accept their responsibility for Chechnya. The Duma, for example, is being urged to raise with the government the question of the wide discrepancy between the number of outrages reported and the number of cases brought to justice.