



Left: Unscathed buildings are rarer than bombed structures in Grozny.

Below: Newborns at the main maternity hospital in Grozny.

Hell's waiting room

Beating the drums of peace in Chechnya

Story and photographs by Bramwell Ryan

The smell of rancid meat piled on a crusty mattress blended with the reek of burning rubber. In the murky light of the two-room cattle shed, the screams of insanity echoed off the splintering, single ply walls.

This is Maleka's home. Her legs are paralyzed from a Russian military shell that exploded during the second Chechen war. Now, covered in bedsores, she mutters alone, her world reduced to a small window overlooking a quiet, dirt track.

Over and over in Chechen she pants warnings of nearby witches and rapid pleas that "it's not my fault." Her husband is one of many drunks in the village of Argun in central Chechnya. Her eldest son is feral. Life in the hovel was so bad that even in this Darwinian republic a local police officer took pity. Last winter he did a freelance apprehension of her three youngest children and took them to a home for war orphans, 40 km away.

Today Heda, 9, and her brother Monsur, 11, came back to visit their mother. Their other brother at the orphanage, Mikhail, 12, tearfully pleaded he couldn't make the trip. When she saw her children, Maleka's thin, worn body squirmed on the grey sheets where she spends her life. Joy and madness, kisses watered in the spittle of accusations – she clung to her lost children, the only interruption in her months of lonely misery.

Heda wept with her mother. Monsur had the wide-eyed stare of the shocked. When they first arrived at the Lamb's Home orphanage in Gikalo, a village of 5,000, nine kilometers south of the capital Grozny, they were withdrawn, filthy and dressed in singlets with no shoes. Seven months later they're clean, they laugh and they play with the other 40 kids in the home.

Most of the children at the orphanage don't have

parents to visit. Their stories are depressingly similar. A bomb or a land mine. A late night round up of all the men in the village who never returned. Death is close in this part of the world. The brutality of back-to-back Chechen wars is a life-changing event for these kids. And the reality of the on-going, low-level conflict is as much a daily fact as their math homework. The orphans at Lamb's Home can tell the difference between the sounds of ordinance. During the infrequent daytime shelling they determine the caliber and source – tank shells or perhaps heavy artillery from the hills west of the home. During the more constant nightly rounds the kids weren't around to offer identification. They were in bunk beds, covers pulled over heads in fear.

It's not just the children who are frightened. Prior to a trip into Grozny, a moderate Muslim woman, and the heavily armed guard riding in the same vehicle, pray aloud for protection from the Russian military at the highway checkpoints. They knew too many people who disappeared at these stops.

The recent vote on a new Chechen constitution, written and presented by Moscow, is supposed to be the first step in easing the fears of young and old. The forty pages of the constitutional document are covered in dense 10-point type. Few Chechens



have read it. It's like the fine print on an insurance contract – something we should read, but don't. And with no independent media to distill and interpret the document, the people of Chechnya treated it, and the vote, like any insurance – a bet on the future.

But the odds aren't great. Most in the republic are weary after nine years of war. They want peace and a chance to rebuild. But as the recent bombings show, they also want revenge. And in this Old Testament land of signs and wonders, where atrocities are as fresh as today's bread, little faith resides in the text of constitutions.

Far greater trust is put in the many rumours. One says that Jesus returned to earth in 1994 – the year the first Chechen war started - and he will soon come to the republic to save the people from continued conflict. Another sees England as the potential saviour. The story goes that the British, who occupied the area in the mid-1800s, were the first to produce detailed maps of the vast natural resources. Those old maps are closely guarded in London and will soon light the fire under the British army to invade, conquer and bring lasting peace.

The dry language of constitutions doesn't deal with the massive corruption in the republic. Pessimists suggest the war will drag on, and even reignite, because too many benefit from the chaos. Russian soldiers get combat pay for serving in Chechnya – substantially more than they earn at home. At most checkpoints they demand and pocket several hundred roubles as an illicit toll. In Ingushetia, a neighbouring republic where many Chechen refugees fled, price gouging is common. There the war has been good if the hundreds of large new homes sprouting in the capital, Nazran, are any indication.

Extortion notes wrapped around rocks are thrown into the courtyards of homes, from gangs of Chechens. "We're getting it from our own and the Russians," says one refugee. "We don't know who to be frightened of anymore. They make money off people's tears."

Meanwhile the daily frustrations of life mount. There is virtually no telephone service in the republic. Landline exchanges were destroyed in the wars and the military continues to jam cell phone transmissions. Gasoline for cars is only available from jars at roadside stands. Troops slow traffic daily with tanks lurching down the centre of the road while sappers scan the shoulders for mines with metal detectors and dogs. No travel is allowed at night, even for medical emergencies. Everything moves slowly in Chechnya, except for the deterioration of the roads.

The destruction of the capital city though, was swift. Bricks and mortar, the Soviet era projection of power, lie scattered everywhere. Grozny, the Russian word for "terrible", lives up to its name. It is full of hollow eyed dwellings, the windows and doors blown away by bombs. Apartment buildings swoon, their balconies hanging at crazy angles. Entire floors gape to the elements and walls are peppered by gunfire. Other buildings are pancaked. It's like a location setting for the apocalyptic Mad Max films. The Russian government recently announced compensation for owners of war-damaged buildings.



Many Chechens are cynical as to whether the payments will actually arrive. Regardless, the buildings may be easier to put back together than the uneasy peace.

Even the hospitals are damaged and there is little public funding to repair them. Some have no water and others only one gas heater in the hallway. And the medical system is as chaotic as the streets outside. At the Central Grozny Maternity Hospital a young mother giving birth started hemorrhaging badly. There was no blood for a transfusion so a nurse sprinted to the cafes beyond the front gates calling for blood donor volunteers. She found several willing to give – the fate of the mother is unknown.

Equally unknown is what kind of future the kids at Lambs Home will face. In Chechnya, family honour and the blood feud are more important than laws or constitutions. Ordinary people, without shame or caution, speak of neighbours who will die in the coming months in revenge for past killings, collaboration with the Russians or slights of some sort. Other Chechens predict a civil war if the Russians ever leave.

Monsur, the young boy who visited his mother, almost never speaks and his face is usually blank. Back at the home after the trip to Argun, the orphans gave an impromptu concert in the courtyard. More than 40 children, with youthful abandon, belted out an anthem. It was a fast-paced number but Monsur wasn't singing with the rest. He stood to the side behind a wooden table tapping out a complicated rhythm as if the surface was a bongo drum. Beating loudly and frantically in time to the music he finally cracked a smile. His face flushed with the wild energy of Chechnya he was communicating in a way he couldn't with speech. And these children, who have already suffered enough, were singing of peace, not an ode to the drums of war.



Maleka screamed and wept when she saw her son and daughter.