

SA aids Chechnya battle victims

When a convoy of Salvation Army vehicles crossed the border from Ingushetia (Southern Russia) into war-torn Chechnya enroute to the besieged city of Grozny in early March, they became the first humanitarian organization to enter Chechnya since the beginning of the second Chechnya war.

Their small convoy was loaded with food for small children and infants and basic medical supplies; elite soldiers and two armored vehicles guarded them.

Recently, Western officer Captain Mike Olsen, international emergency services coordinator, traveled to Grozny to observe the Army's relief work. Captain Sandra Ryan, Rostov-on-Don corps officer who, with her husband Geoff, pioneered the Army's work in Southern Russia, served as translator. Capt. Geoff Ryan, regional officer for Southern Russia, initiated and manages the Army's response to victims of this conflict.



“From a guarded compound in Nazran, a staff of nearly 50 processes and responds to refugee needs,” said Olsen. “From here, teams distribute baby food daily. Teachers are dispatched to Salvation Army elementary school sites within refugee camps and medicines are distributed to hospitals and clinics. Each day over 700 refugee elementary school children attend classes in large tent schoolrooms with books and teachers provided by The Salvation Army. Counselling and limited therapy are made available to children suffering the traumatic after affects of the fighting, shelling and bombing.”

Five of the seven feeding teams are in the field each day, traveling to rotating distribution sites. “Two of these teams make the trek into Chechnya each day, going to a different location.” Olsen explained. “They travel a circuit of between 15 and 30 distribution points for each team. More than 23,000 families are registered to receive supplemental child nutrition. It is estimated the program feeds over 60,000 different children each month.”

Grozny, Chechnya

The destroyed and nearly abandoned city of Grozny is now an armed Russian fortress. The team drove past the spot where the severed head of one of the four Baptist pastors in Grozny was discovered.” Two other pastors were killed and one escaped,” Olsen said.

They passed through Grozny to the village of Stary Sunja, about 14 km south of the city, where two SA teams were registering families and providing children's food to about 500 families.

After returning to Grozny, Olsen interviewed the deputy mayor. "Our interview was conducted on a side street near the military headquarters, surrounded by our own nervous security guards, plus soldiers and policemen in camouflage gear. Deputy Mayor Ramzan Shaptukaev had an automatic pistol in his belt and an assault rifle over his shoulder while they talked. "He thank-ed us for coming to feed the children in Grozny and acknowledged that The Salvation Army was the first humanitarian assistance organization to enter Grozny and the only one to come consistently on a regular basis," said Olsen.