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PEOPLE: Red Cross worker travels to Tajikistan

Dangerous job a way of life

BY JENNIFER BROWN
 Staff Writer

She's helped refugees from Kosovar settle in her own country and travelled around the world to help victims of war and others whose lives have been ravaged by flooding.

Away from home for months at a time, Red Cross worker and Newmarket resident Donna Chanda says her work is not a job, it's a way of life.

Now the 38-year-old Chanda is about to head an international relief project that will take her away from the comfort and safety of Canada for the next 12 months, as she heads a mission assisting victims of landmines in Tajikistan in the former Soviet Union.

It's a daunting task, but at the same time it's just the kind of project Chanda has been waiting for since she began working with the Red Cross in York Region in 1990.

"A year is longer than I would like, but it is part of a three-year program and this is the second year," said Chanda.

She begins her journey Nov. 8, when she will fly to Ottawa, then on to Geneva and, finally, Tajikistan, where she will replace another Canadian Red Cross worker, Jackie Wright of Winnipeg.

Chanda will be managing an orthopedic centre, which helps victims of war. There are about 3,000 lower limb amputees in Tajikistan, which borders on Afghanistan and Uzbekistan.

In the first year of the project, the Red Cross helped identify and treat amputees. Chanda will continue that work and devise ways of dealing with the long-term needs of amputees. It is a joint effort by the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Tajik Red Crescent Society, the Tajikistan government and the Canadian Red Cross.

The orthopedic centre provides prosthetics to landmine victims in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, one of five former Soviet republics which has been independent since 1991 and besieged by five years of civil war.

Sporadic fighting continues in the country between government and opposition groups and Chanda knows the mission in Tajikistan poses many risks.

"There can be situations that arise. It is fairly stable but, as with any country, part of the former Soviet Union, skirmishes can arise," she said.

Chanda is no stranger to such hazards. In the summer of 1997, she returned from spending nine months in the Russian town of

Nalchik in the Chechen republic, as an international delegate helping the Russian Red Cross with medical and disaster relief.

But days before Christmas, the year before, Chanda acted as an escort to the body of murdered Red Cross nurse Nancy Malloy, killed in war-torn Chechnya.

Malloy and five other Red Cross workers were killed when a gang of masked gunmen knocked down the doors of their Red Cross hospital staff residence at 4 a.m. and killed five women and a man as they slept. A seventh worker was seriously injured.

The town Chanda was in was 100 km away from where the killings took place.

It was the worst attack in the 133-year history of the International Committee of the Red Cross and Malloy is the first Canadian Red Cross worker to be killed in the field.

"It's one of the worst experiences I have ever had," said Chanda.

Most recently, Chanda led Operation Parasol at CFB Borden for Kosovar refugees, which she said reminded her of how much she enjoyed that kind of work.

"It brought it close to home — it was more of an international mission than a local one," she said.

The impoverished and mountainous country in Tajikistan has weather extremes ranging from summer temperatures of 40C to winter temperatures dipping to -45C in mountain areas.

That has made packing for her year-long journey a challenge in itself.

"I have everything spread all over my living-room floor. And essentially, I need to pack for four seasons."

With few places to buy anything and no restaurants to speak of, Chanda knows life will be limited to her work and socializing with the other delegates sharing a house in Dushanbe.

And she knows Christmas will be difficult this year, away from her husband Barney and family, not only for the holidays but for the ringing in of the millennium in a foreign land.

"It is a long time to be away but he certainly understands my desire to go. This is the biggest Canadian-led Red Cross project to date," she said.

The project in Tajikistan is financed by Canadian philanthropists Kroum and Eva Pindoff, owners of Music World and is believed to be the largest single Canadian landmine assistance project funded by individuals.



Donna Chanda is about to head an international relief project.

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