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Medvedev Snubbing Beslan Mothers Talks

By Alexandra Odynova

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A memorial in Moscow dedicated to the victims of the Beslan tragedy. **Vladimir Filonov**

President Dmitry Medvedev at the last minute dodged a meeting with mothers who lost their children in the bloody Beslan crisis, possibly fearing that they would criticize his patron and predecessor Vladimir Putin.

The Kremlin failed to account for the cancellation, and though unofficial sources said the meeting was only rescheduled, that looked like damage control after what an analyst called a failed publicity stunt.

Medvedev has already taken flak from bloggers this week for not inviting the more vocal critics of the Kremlin's handling of the 2004 Beslan crisis, which left 334 dead — most of them children.

Susanna Dudiyeva and Elvira Tutayeva flew from North Ossetia to Moscow on Thursday only

to learn that their meeting with Medvedev — which he promised them months ago — was postponed until "sometime next week," local news web site Region15.ru said.

The presidential office issued no statement on the matter, and a Kremlin spokeswoman contacted by The Moscow Times refused to comment.

"It was known yesterday, but we learned about it only today," Dudiyeva, who is a member of the Beslan Mothers Committee, said Thursday.

Medvedev had unspecified "urgent business," another committee member, Aneta Gadiyeva, told Kavkaz-uzel.ru, without elaborating. The president visited a Moscow children's hospital Thursday, where he called on Russian filmmakers to shoot a movie about disabled kids "on par with 'Forrest Gump.'"

The three-day standoff at the Beslan school, seized by Islamist militants in September 2004, ended in a bloody storming by law enforcement agencies and the deaths of many hostages.

Several official probes cleared governmental agencies involved in the siege, but critics, including many Beslan mothers, have accused officials of mishandling the operation and possibly sacrificing children's lives in order to destroy the terrorists.

Putin, who was the president in 2004, only offered to meet with the Beslan Mothers Committee once, but most members turned down the proposal in 2005 because it was scheduled for the anniversary of the siege and disrupted mourning for the victims.

A group called Voice of Beslan split from the Beslan Mothers Committee, also in 2005, and took a pronounced anti-Kremlin stance on the matter, demanding the dismissal of top counter-terrorism officials, as well as Putin himself. The group was declared extremist and banned the same year, but continued to operate without legal status.

Medvedev visited the memorial to the victims in Beslan in February, when he briefly spoke with Dudiyeva and Tutayeva and promised them a more substantial meeting. The invitation was not extended to Voice of Beslan members, which caused many bloggers to accuse him of hypocrisy.

The committee said Wednesday that it was planning to ask Medvedev to punish regional, not federal, officials for their handling of the siege, and to create a legal status for victims of terrorist attacks, which would entitle them to certain social benefits for their loss.

"Both the Beslan Mothers and the Voice of Beslan trust Medvedev, that's why we have been seeking the meeting for the last two years," Ella Kasayeva, chairwoman of the Voice of Beslan, said by telephone Thursday.

"We believe he has a more human face," she said.

The meeting looked like a mistake by Medvedev's PR team, which wanted to play him against Putin, but did not dare to, said Stanislav Belkovsky, an independent political analyst.

"Medvedev's team might have decided to pitch him against Putin, but realized at the last moment that he can't do that," Belkovsky said by telephone.

"When the scandal with the Voice of Beslan roared across the Internet, Medvedev realized he would face questions he can't answer," he said.

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