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Decade After Beslan, Questions Remain Unanswered

By Ivan Nechepurenko

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Photos of the victims on the walls of the former School Number One in Beslan.

The children who set off for their first day of school 10 years ago in the small Caucasus town of Beslan, North Ossetia, will graduate from high school this coming academic year — at least, those who survived will.

On Sept. 1, 2004, a group of 32 armed terrorists took as their hostages more than 1,110 people, including schoolchildren, their parents, relatives and teachers. The group demanded that Moscow recognize Chechnya's complete independence and withdraw all Russian forces from the restive republic.

The three-day hostage crisis claimed 385 lives, including those of 156 children, and left 700 victims injured.

Ten years have passed since the attack — a decade often described as a pivotal period

in Russia's recent history. But many of the key questions raised by the tragedy remain unanswered.

Questions

While it is clear who took the hostages, mystery still shrouds the question of who initiated the storming of the school building and the subsequent bloodbath between the terrorists, government forces and local vigilantes.

What is known is that the security forces began to storm the campus after a bomb rigged up by terrorists in the school gym — where the majority of hostages were being held — exploded. Twenty-two seconds later, another explosion followed. The cause of the blasts remains unknown.

Some hostages claim an explosive detonated after being hit by a missile launched from the roof of a nearby building by a member of Russian special forces. The official version maintains that the bombs were set off by terrorists either deliberately or accidentally. More than half of the hostage fatalities were caused by the explosions and ensuing fires.

Another unanswered question is whether some of the terrorists were able to escape. According to the official version of events, there were 32 of them, and all but one were killed. The only one captured, Nur-Pashi Kulayev, was sentenced to life imprisonment, but both the hostages and the organizer of the attack, then-leader of the Chechen rebel movement Shamil Basayev, claimed that some of the attackers had escaped.

Voice of Beslan

Voice of Beslan, a grassroots nongovernmental organization comprised of victims of the hostage crisis and their relatives, is dedicated to finding the answers to these and other questions. Having splintered off from the more government-friendly Mothers of Beslan, it has endeavored to persuade the government to acknowledge its mistakes in the rescue operation and punish the individuals responsible.

Voice of Beslan members — who say President Vladimir Putin is personally responsible for what they believe to have been a disastrous end to the hostage crisis — staged hunger strikes in 2006 to draw attention to their claims.

In 2007, the Supreme Court of North Ossetia — the republic where the organization was registered — ordered Voice of Beslan to disband after another organization submitted documents to register itself under the same name. The organization's "appeal to all those who care about the Beslan tragedy" was included in 2009 on the Federal List of Extremist Materials, where it still remains.

According to the local prosecutors the appeal constituted the dissemination of "false information that President Vladimir Putin helps terrorists and acts as a guarantor for criminals."

"After the Beslan terrorist attack, the government felt it could do whatever it wanted. No senior siloviki or public officials at federal or local levels lost their jobs, but the Russian people

lost their right to directly elect governors," Voice of Beslan head Ella Kesayeva told The Moscow Times.

In the wake of the tragedy, Putin altered Russia's political system, replacing direct elections of regional governors with presidential appointments approved by local legislature. In 2012 President Dmitry Medvedev reinstated direct elections, albeit in a more curtailed mode, with the candidates having to collect signatures from municipal deputies.

Putin specifically cited the Beslan tragedy in justifying his decision on the gubernatorial elections, saying that in the face of a terrorist threat, the government must enforce national unity.

"In the eyes of parents and relatives, it is the state that acts like a terrorist. For us it does not matter who killed the terrorists. What we saw were tanks shelling the whole school with our children inside," Kesayeva said in a phone interview from Beslan.

Today Kesayeva is still tormented by the fact that she was not inside the school as the three-day nightmare unfolded.

"When my girl came out, she asked me if I had forgotten about her. She was 13 at the time," she said in a trembling voice. Her daughter is now 22 and is studying to become a pediatrician.

Other mothers were with their children for the duration of the terror, but were helpless to save them.

Svetlana Mariyeva's daughter was 13 when she died in her arms in the school.

"Putin tells us now that the Ukrainian government is attacking its own people, but in our school our government was doing the same. It was killing children," Mariyeva told The Moscow Times.

"This is an enormous crime. The terrorists were the enemies, but why did the government do nothing to save the children? Why did Putin give the order to shoot at the school? He was the only one who could have done that," she said.

Putin's Role

The same day, more than 1,600 kilometers away in Moscow, Aslambek Aslakhanov's son and daughter were also starting school. Their father, Putin's aide on the North Caucasus, was summoned to the Kremlin right from the school courtyard after dropping them off.

Aslakhanov was Putin's point man during the three-day crisis, and was personally authorized by the president to conduct negotiations with the terrorists and "consider all [their] conditions except for Chechnya's independence."

"Putin said we must to do everything to save the children," Aslakhanov told The Moscow Times in his office.

Aslakhanov made a list of 700 political and cultural heavyweights who were prepared to replace the hostages. With this list, along with the offer to release terrorists and insurgents

being held in prison, Aslakhanov went to Beslan, having arranged to meet with the hostage-takers at 3 p.m. on Sept. 3.

He flew into Beslan at 1 p.m. He heard the first blast, which occurred at 1:03 p.m., while walking from the plane to his car, he said. The negotiations were off the table. Hostages began to die en masse.

"I don't know who was responsible for the blasts, but they were not interested in negotiations," Aslakhanov said.

"I have taken part in resolving many terrorist acts, but I have never seen anything like what happened during the Beslan siege," he said.

Aslakhanov also conducted negotiations during the Moscow theater hostage crisis in 2002. He went into the Dubrobka theater where more than 800 people were being held hostage and came out with 28 of them.

In Beslan, many local men took up arms, and were patrolling the area around the school during the siege, before the ensuing carnage. After the blasts inside the school, the presence of armed militias made the situation even more chaotic. According to Aslakhanov, the failure to keep away the vigilantes was one of the main mistakes made by local authorities.

"If the storming of the building had been planned by the government, it would not have been conducted in such an incompetent way," Aslakhanov said.

The Beslan tragedy will be remembered on Monday and throughout the week across Russia. Aslakhanov said he would not do anything to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the day that changed so many lives forever.

"I will not commemorate it. I never will, as it is always with me," he said. "I always think about it and always remember it."

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