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Negotiating the Impossible?

The Beslan Hostage Crisis

Adam Dolnik



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Front cover image: A man touches a wall covered with pictures of children who died in the Beslan hostage siege. Photo by REUTERS/Sergei Karpukhin.

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Introduction¹

On 1 September 2004, a group of terrorists seized more than 1,200 hostages in School Number One in the North Ossetian town of Beslan. It was the first day of the new school year. The deadliest hostage crisis in history was about to unfold. After a fifty-two hour stand-off, detonation of explosive devices inside the school triggered a chaotic rescue operation, in which 331 people were killed,² 176 of them children. The Beslan school hostage crisis was an unprecedented terrorist attack, both in its scale and targeting. It was not only the largest ever terrorist takeover of a school,³ but also the third deadliest terrorist attack in world history. It is therefore clear that learning the lessons from Beslan is one of the key prerequisites for designing effective counter-terrorism strategies for the twenty-first century.

Despite its global infamy, the Beslan school tragedy still remains a widely misunderstood phenomenon. What really happened during the incident? Who were the attackers, and what was their goal? What was the treatment of hostages like? Was it possible to resolve the crisis via the process of negotiation? How did this incident reach such a tragic end? All of these questions are yet to be satisfactorily answered. Based on exhaustive open source research in three languages, examination of thousands of pages

of witness testimonies and court transcripts, analysis of available video footage, and extensive field research in Beslan, Chechnya, and Ingushetia, including the inspection of evidence left behind in the school, visits to the perpetrators' home villages, reconstruction of their trip from their training camp to Beslan, and dozens of interviews with hostages, witnesses, relatives, negotiators, and investigators, this report will analyze the myths and facts of the attack, with the clear purpose of identifying successes and failures. Particular attention will be devoted to an analysis of the events that took place in terms of negotiability, in an attempt to provide an analytical perspective on the possible alternatives that were available to the Russian authorities as the incident progressed. A critical inquiry into the incident is especially important, as lessons learned from past hostage crises are an invaluable tool in developing future response frameworks.

Why is Beslan relevant today? Ominously, there is ample evidence to suggest that another Beslan-type incident is likely, if not inevitable. Globally-distributed terrorist manuals indicate that terrorists are studying and learning past barricade hostage incidents, such as Beslan. For instance, issue ten of Al-Qa'ida's online resource, *al Battar* features a highly analytical guide to hostage-

¹ Some portions of this report have appeared elsewhere in shorter form. The negotiation aspect of Beslan was analyzed in a paper entitled, 'The Beslan Hostage Crisis' which was presented at the Processes of International Negotiation Workshop, 'Negotiating with Terrorists' at the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, Laxenburg, Austria, 9-10 June 2006. The counter-terrorism lessons of the crisis are analyzed in a chapter entitled, 'The Siege of Beslan's School Number One', which will be published in James J F Forest, *Countering Terrorism in the 21st Century*, (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, forthcoming in 2007). Finally, some portions of this report are also included in: Adam Dolnik and Keith M. Fitzgerald, *Negotiating Hostage Crises with the New Terrorists* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, forthcoming in 2007).

² This number excludes the thirty-one terrorists killed.

³ Other famous hostage crises in which terrorists targeted schools include the 1974 Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine attack in Ma'alot, Israel, and the 1977 takeover of a school in Bovensmilde in the Netherlands.

taking written by the late Abdul Aziz al Muqrin, the former leader of Al-Qa'ida in Saudi Arabia. In this manual, al Muqrin provides detailed instructions on every aspect of carrying out a high profile barricade hostage incident – from the selection of team members and their training to treatment of hostages and conduct of negotiations. The *al Battar* manual, as well as recent hostage crises, such as the Moscow theatre, the Beslan school, the Oasis residential compound in Khobar, Saudi Arabia, or the recently disrupted plot in Prague, are a clear indication that barricade hostage-taking will henceforth:

- entail a much greater willingness to execute hostages;
- feature large teams of willing-to-die hostage-takers, who will have the capability of effectively repelling a possible rescue operation; and
- include members who will have detailed knowledge of the hostage negotiation and rescue teams' 'cook-book'.

If we are to keep up with the challenge, we must also learn from lessons of past attacks and adjust our response strategies accordingly. Beslan, in particular, provides many of these invaluable lessons.

Consider the set-up:

- more than 1,200 hostages, most of them children;
- a team of some fifty to seventy well-trained hostage-takers strategically positioned around the school and apparently ready to die;
- unconditional demands that seemed impossible to meet;
- 127 explosive devices set up around the school that can be activated with a single button;
- security cameras installed by the terrorists around the school to monitor all entrances;
- gas masks and two sentry dogs in place to help detect and counter a possible use of incapacitating gas;
- twenty-one hostages already executed and a dozen more killed during the initial takeover;
- the hostages inside suffering from immense heat exhaustion and lack of fluids; and
- outside, a group of angry parents armed with guns, threatening to shoot the rescue team members if they attempt to storm the school.

Quite simply, this was a nightmare scenario that would present an unprecedented chal-

Figure 1: Characteristics of a Negotiable Hostage Incident (FBI)

1. The desire to live on the part of the hostage-taker.
2. The threat of force by the police.
3. The hostage-taker must present demands for release of hostages.
4. The negotiator must be viewed by the hostage-taker as someone who can hurt but desires to help.
5. The negotiator needs time to develop trust with hostage-takers.
6. The location must be contained and stabilized to support negotiations.
7. The hostage-taker and negotiator must have a reliable means of communication, either by phone or face-to-face.
8. The negotiator must be able to 'deal' with the hostage-taker who controls the hostages and makes the decisions.

Source: McMains, Mullins, *Crisis Negotiations: Managing Critical incidents and Hostage Situations in Law Enforcement and Corrections*, Anderson Publishing 2nd edition, 2001.

lenge for *any* response team in *any* country in the world.

At first glance, it is obvious that we are not prepared. While there are many trained crisis negotiators around the world, hardly any of them have ever had contact with a *terrorist* hostage-taking incident. Further, the training curriculum of most hostage negotiators focuses on resolving crises that do not take into consideration issues such as ideology, religion, or the differing set of objectives and mindsets of ideological hostage-takers. This, in particular, characterizes the 'new' breed of terrorists: less discriminate, more lethal, and better prepared. Further, many of the paradigms and presumptions upon which the contemporary practice of hostage negotiation is based do not reflect the reality of Beslan-type incidents.

For example, Figure 1 summarizes the characteristics of a negotiable incident, which are currently used by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and other crisis negotiation bodies as the basic guideline for determining whether a given hostage incident has a chance of being resolved through the negotiation process. Additional checklists and criteria are also used. As will become apparent throughout this paper, most of these conditions were not satisfied in Beslan, and numerous other obstacles and indicators

of volatility were present as well. Further, the conditions of adhering to many of the standard FBI guidelines for crisis negotiations (Figure 2) were simply not present. Hence, following the current 'cookbook' of crisis negotiation teams, the Beslan situation could only be resolved through a tactical resolution. But how does one proceed with such a decision if there are more than 1,200 hostages inside, the opposition is ready for death and has made numerous preparations to make an assault as costly, in terms of human life, as possible? Under such conditions, is a full breach really the preferable option? Or even a plausible worst case alternative? Do other, less volatile means exist? This paper will explore some of these issues using the Beslan case study.

The greatest limitation of this report stems from the fact that most available accounts of the hostage crisis differ significantly in their description of virtually every aspect of the incident. In addition, the story has mutated over time and many different versions and pieces of evidence, which cloud the picture even more, have been introduced. This is further complicated by government secrecy, vested interests, media censorship, as well as the fact that even eyewitness accounts are often contradictory. Some details are still being disputed, and therefore some aspects

Figure 2: FBI Guidelines for Crisis Negotiations

1. The use of time to increase basic needs, making it more likely that the subject will exchange a hostage for some basic need.
2. The use of time to collect intelligence on the subject that will help develop a trade.
3. The use of time to reduce the subject's expectation of getting what he wants.
4. Trades can be made for food, drink, transportation, and money.
5. Trades can not be made for weapons or the exchange of hostages.
6. The boss does not negotiate.
7. Start bidding high to give yourself room to negotiate (ask for all the hostages).
8. Quid pro quo: get something for everything.
9. Never draw attention to the hostages; it gives the subject too much bargaining power.
10. Manipulate anxiety levels by cutting off power, gas, water, etc.

Source: McMains, Mullins, *Crisis Negotiations: Managing Critical incidents and Hostage Situations in Law Enforcement and Corrections*, Anderson Publishing 2nd edition, 2001. p. 37

of the crisis cannot be determined with absolute certainty. For the sake of completeness, alternative interpretations of the discussed events or author's comments on the uncertainty of specific pieces of information are included as footnotes. For a complete picture, it is important to pay particular attention to this supplementary information.

The first part of this report will analyze the lessons of past incidents and apply them to the unfolding Beslan situation. The second part will provide a chronology of the crisis, with specific focus on the negotiation aspect. The third part will then analyze the negotia-

bility of the incident, incorporating an analysis of the strategic calculus behind the attack, indicators of volatility and de-escalation, and the failures of the strategy employed in Beslan. The fourth part will highlight some of the other critical aspects of the incident, including the rescue operation, media management, discrepancies in the investigation, and events that occurred before Beslan, which in retrospect could have provided an intelligence picture concrete enough to prevent the attack in the first place. And finally, the conclusion will look at the lessons learnt and prospects for the future.

Chapter 1: Background

Soon after the takeover of School Number One (SNO), it was obvious that the Beslan attack carried all the signs of an operation masterminded by the infamous Chechen warlord, Shamil Basayev. There was a large, heavily armed team of militants dressed in camouflage, women wearing suicide belts, the use of mines and booby-traps to secure the site, the strategic positioning of snipers, and more general signs of meticulous preparation. At the same time, however, this early identification of the likely culprit provided an opportunity to assess the situation based on Basayev's previous hostage incidents, with a key focus on past demands, readiness to execute hostages, history of enforcing deadlines, past negotiation strategies of both sides, and the final settlements. Not only can such an analysis provide an insight into the terrorists' calculus behind the attack, it can also generate precedents, set by past agreements, that serve as valuable markers for hostage negotiators in subsequent communications.

Basayev

Basayev's involvement in terrorist activity dated back to November 1991 when he and two associates hijacked a Russian TU-154 aircraft from Mineralnye Vody to Ankara, threatening to blow up the plane if Russia did not lift the state of emergency in Chechnya. The attackers hosted a press conference, and after receiving a guarantee of safe passage

back to Chechnya, they allowed the plane and passengers to return safely. Then on 14 June 1995, just weeks after a Russian bomb destroyed Basayev's home in Vedeno, killing eleven members of his family, including his Abkhazian wife and children, he personally led a 142-strong commando unit for 'Operation Jihad' in Moscow (specifically at the Mineralnye Vody Airport) to 'stop the war or die'. The team made it all the way to the Russian town of Budyonnovsk, but having run out of bribe money, the group was arrested and brought to the police station.⁴ Once there, previously undiscovered fighters emerged from three Kamaz trucks and seized some 2,500 hostages in a hospital, demanding that Russian forces pull out of Chechnya.⁵ To resolve the crisis that unfolded, the responding Russian forces, led by the elite Alpha commando unit, twice assaulted the Chechen positions but were forced to retreat, partially due to the terrorists' use of hostages as human shields.⁶ The stand-off continued for another five days, after which Basayev's men negotiated with then Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin a free passage out of Budyonnovsk, as well as the announcement of a temporary cease-fire and a declaration of the Russian commitment to serious negotiations with Chechen representatives. The Budyonnovsk siege killed 166 hostages and injured 541.⁷

Budyonnovsk was significant for several reasons. Firstly, it was the first Chechen operation deliberately targeting Russian civilians.

⁴ Aukai Collins, *My Jihad* (New York: Pocket Star Books, 2002) p. 80.

⁵ John Gidduck, *Terror at Beslan*, (Golden, CO: Archangel Group Inc., 2005) p. 68.

⁶ John Arquilla and Theodore Karasik, 'Chechnya: A Glimpse of Future Conflict?' *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 22 (July – September 1999).

⁷ Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty: 'Fact Box: Major Terrorist Incidents Tied to Russian-Chechen War,' Internet. Available at <<http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2004/09/d981dd2d-8b08-41ff-a2e2-ada25338093c.html>>. Accessed on 11 December 2004.

Commenting on the objectives of the siege, Basayev stated: 'We wanted to show to the people in Russia that this war is very close to them too; we wanted them to see what blood looks like, and how it is when people are dying. We wanted them to understand it, to wake up.'⁸ This statement is crucial, as it effectively summarizes the entire strategic logic later adopted by Basayev's *Riyadus-Salikhin Suicide Fighters Battalion* (RAS), the same group that held the hostages in Beslan. The second point of significance lies in the fact that in Budyonnovsk, Basayev succeeded in forcing the Russians into a humiliating position of giving in to his demands, a development that not only gave him a high level of confidence in the effectiveness of the tactic used, but also shaped Russia's reactions to similar incidents in the future.

The tremendous success of Budyonnovsk gave Basayev mythic status amongst Chechen separatists. He embraced large-scale hostage-taking operations as his signature tool, especially following Salman Raduyev's imitative attack in Kizlyar.⁹ After

this raid, Basayev criticized Raduyev for a negotiation failure, but also boasted: 'Budyonnovsk and Kizlyar will repeat themselves until Russia recognizes the Chechen Republic'.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, when the need came to launch a spectacular terrorist operation in 2002, Basayev returned to his signature tactic and designed an ambitious plan to perpetrate four major acts of terror against the civilian population in Moscow 'with explosions in densely populated places as part of a tactic to frighten', culminating in the seizure of the State Duma.¹¹ However, following two failed bombing attempts in Moscow, Basayev modified his plan, and on 23 October 2002, a group of at least forty-three armed men and women took 979 people hostage at the Dubrovka Theatre in Moscow. This 'Basayev-style' hostage-taking operation lasted for fifty-eight hours and ended in a controversial rescue operation that resulted in 129 dead hostages, most of whom died due to gas exposure during the rescue.¹²

⁸ Paul J Murphy, *The Wolves of Islam: Russia and the Faces of Chechen Terror*, (Dulles: Brassey's Inc, 2005).

⁹ Six months after the Budyonnovsk incident, another crucial hostage event took place in Dagestan, where Salman Raduyev's 250-strong Chechen commando unit took more than 2,000 hostages at a hospital in the city of Kizlyar, and again demanded the unconditional withdrawal of Russian forces from Chechnya. Somewhat unexpectedly, the rebels were again granted free passage, and an eleven-bus convoy carrying the commandos plus 143 hostages evacuated the area. As the convoy approached the Dagestani-Chechen border, Russian forces unsuccessfully attempted a surprise attack aimed at freeing the hostages and punishing the terrorists. The rebels, however, were able to fight off the initial attack and retreated to a small nearby village of Pervomayskaya, seizing twenty-five additional hostages in the process. There, another long stand-off began. Patience wore thin on the part of the Russians, and on 15 January 1996, they launched a furious assault on the village. Outnumbered ten to one, the Chechens were still able to hold off the Russian troops, though, at times, a good portion of luck was involved. On 16 January 1996, while the rebels at Pervomayskoe continued to hold off the assault, another commando unit sympathetic to the Chechen cause hijacked a Black Sea ferry, the *Euroasia*, and threatened to blow it up – along with the 255 hostages on board – unless the Russian army stopped the siege. In addition, yet another group of rebels kidnapped thirty employees of a Russian power plant in Grozny and issued similar demands. Finally, the Pervomayskaya siege ended when the rebels, aided by a complete breakdown of Russian morale and by reinforcements smuggled in from Chechnya, managed to escape the village. The next day, after the Russian forces finally took control over Pervomayskaya, the hijackers of the *Euroasia* called off their plan to blow up the ship and surrendered to Turkish authorities. The exact number of casualties of the Pervomayskaya siege remains unreported.

¹⁰ Murphy, *Op cit.*, p. 54.

¹¹ 'Chechen terrorist planned to seize Parliament building in Moscow', *Pravda.RU*. Available at: <<http://newsfromrussia.com/accidents/2003/06/20/48458.html>>.

¹² Adam Dolnik and Richard Pilch, 'The Moscow Theater Incident: Perpetrators, Tactics, and the Russian Response', *International Negotiation*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (2003).

Evolution of Strategic Mindset

What were the objectives of the theatre raid? The demands appear straightforward, but based on previous Russian responses to similar incidents in Budyonnovsk and Kizlyar, the RAS team was absolutely convinced that sooner or later the Russians would launch an assault.¹³ As such, the apparent aim was to achieve maximum casualties among the hostages as a result of the *rescue operation*, in an attempt to 'show to the whole world that Russian leadership will without mercy slaughter its own citizens in the middle of Moscow.'¹⁴ If this was indeed the goal, then the operation succeeded, as all but three of the 129 fatalities were victims of the rescue attempt. However, Basayev appears to have grossly miscalculated the reaction of the world community to the 'Nord-Ost' operation, which, in the wake of 9/11 and following an effective public relations effort by Moscow, ended up overwhelmingly siding with the Russians. This fact would later be responsible for the immense radicalization and escalation of the RAS campaign, in which the group apparently discarded any consideration for international public opinion. In a statement published in the immediate aftermath of Dubrovka, Basayev was quick to condemn the world for its 'hypocrisy', stating that if the world had 'one tenth of the sympathy [expressed for Dubrovka victims] for the Chechens, the war would have ended long ago'. Basayev also made a gory promise: 'The next time, those who come won't make any demands, won't

take hostages. There will be just one main goal: annihilation of enemies and inflicting upon the enemy, the maximum possible damage.'¹⁵ During the next twenty-four months, he would live up to this promise by waging a campaign of fourteen suicide bombings resulting in the deaths of nearly 500 people. These included the synchronized suicide bombings onboard two domestic flights¹⁶ and at a Moscow train station in the week leading up to Beslan. The strategic calculation behind the taking of children hostage in an Ossetian school certainly confirms the increasingly apocalyptic nature of Basayev's thinking.

There are several important implications that stem from the analysis of the hostage-takers' behaviour during past hostage incidents, as well as from the overall shifting mindset of Basayev's strategy. In all past hostage crises, the operations have been extremely daring and well-planned, and all involved an unusually high number of ready-to-die commandos, some of whom were women. In addition, in all cases, there was a strategic deployment of snipers, mines and booby-traps to secure the site, which along with the exceptionally large number of hostages and hostage-takers, made the launching of casualty-free rescue operations practically impossible. All past operations presented a single demand: the unconditional pull-out of Russian forces from Chechnya. In all cases, the hostage-takers presented death as an inevitable part of their mission, but after several days, the perpetrators chose

¹³ Confirmed by one of the terrorists, Abu Said, who remarked in a live interview for Azeri TV: 'Yes, they will definitely attack. We are waiting for this attack.' (FBIS ID# CEP20021026000120).

¹⁴ Shamil Basayev, 'Statement of Chief of the Military Council of State Defense Council, *Majlis al-Shura*, of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria Abdullah Shamil Abu-Idris concerning the events of 23–26 October 2002 in Moscow'. Available at <<http://62.212.121.113/www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/articlebe27.html?id=605>>. Accessed on 19 October 2004.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ On 24 August 2004, two female suicide bombers detonated hexogen bombs killing all eighty-nine passengers and crew. This was the first time since 1970 that two aircraft were simultaneously bombed in mid-flight, and only the third historical incident in which suicide bombers were used to attack aircraft. The planners apparently studied their targets well, as suggested by the small amount of explosives used and the fact that both women sat by the window just nine rows from the tail – generally considered to be the most vulnerable part of the aircraft.

to live and evacuate the location when an opportunity presented itself. In all previous cases, there was a willingness not only to negotiate, but also to release hostages independently or in exchange for certain concessions. In all these cases, the terrorists let deadlines pass, and only in Budyonnovsk, when Basayev executed five Russian military personnel, some of whom had suffered wounds in battle on the first day, was the execution of hostages involved.¹⁷ It is also clear that in all of these incidents, the Chechens succeeded in attracting wide international attention and then attempted to deflect responsibility for the deaths of the hostages onto the Russian leadership. Beslan clearly fits into the picture, as the stakes were raised by specifically targeting children. A final implication of Basayev's operational progression stems from the predictable pattern in Russian responses. In any hostage incident in Russia, it is absolutely certain that the Russians will employ an armed response. The standard procedure is to create the per-

ception of exhausting all possible negotiation options, while at the same time gathering intelligence, and launching an assault on or immediately after the third day of the crisis. Basayev obviously knew this; further, he had also learnt not to trust Russian promises after his team was deceived in Dubrovka.¹⁸ This would make any future incident even more difficult to resolve.

Overall, from a negotiator's perspective, it was immediately clear that Beslan would be extremely challenging – but not impossible – to negotiate. From the perspective of a terrorism analyst, it was obvious that a bloody rescue operation would eventually put an end to the siege, and that this would most likely happen on the third day of the crisis.¹⁹ The terrorists knew this, too. According to hostage Regina Kusraeva, on the first day of the Beslan siege one of the hostage-takers told the hostages: 'Judging by past experience, we suspect that there will be an assault. If the lights go out, everybody lay on the floor, but don't run; they'll kill you.'²⁰

¹⁷ In Dubrovka, two people were also executed, but neither was a hostage, and the killings constituted a measure necessary to maintain control of the auditorium, not one designed to pressure the authorities at a deadline. And while the moral responsibility for the killing of people is the same, from a negotiator's perspective these different circumstances carry different implications.

¹⁸ On the evening of the second day of the crisis in Dubrovka, the terrorists received a telephone call from General Kazantsev, who promised to come to Moscow to negotiate the following day. The terrorists were happy and relieved, calling off their deadline for executions of hostages and letting their guard down. Several hours later, the rescue operation was launched.

¹⁹ 'Analysts Say School Storming Possible Despite Putin's Statement', *MosNews*, 2 September 2004. <<http://moGoals of the snews.com/news/2004/09/02/analysts.shtml>>.

²⁰ 'Kulayev's trial provides new details on Beslan', *Chechnya Weekly*, Volume 6, Issue 23, 16 June 2005.

Chapter 2: Event Chronology

This section of the report will provide a basic chronology of the events that unfolded in Beslan, with a specific focus on the negotiations. In doing so, some details and wider aspects of the crisis have not been addressed. Some excellent, more detailed descriptive accounts are publicly available²¹ and an interested reader is strongly encouraged to consult them for additional information.

Day 1

At around 0800 on 1 September 2004, the group of terrorists set off from their camp located in the woods near the village of Psedakh in the Malgobek district of the neighbouring Republic of Ingushetia. Just after 0900, they arrived at School Number One (SNO) in Beslan, and with swift action took over 1,200 people hostage. Originally, the attackers divided the hostages into classrooms, later gradually summoning them into the gymnasium and deploying 127 home-made explosive devices around the school building. In the gym itself, devices were placed in basketball hoops, hung on a string running through the middle of the gym, and pasted them to the walls.²² Some of the male hostages were immediately selected out of the crowd and forced to hang up bombs and to barricade windows in the hallways and classrooms. An hour into the siege, the terrorists announced their plans and set the ground rules, among them the order that everyone only speak in Russian. One of the fathers, Ruslan Betrozov, got up and translat-

ed the terrorist speech into Ossetian,²³ and tried to calm everyone down. When he was finished, a terrorist came up to him and asked: 'Have you said everything you wanted to say?' The man nodded and was then shot to death in front of his two sons.

The terrorists were highly organized. There were only about seven guards inside the gym at any given time, but they were working in shifts. The only two doorways into the gymnasium were guarded by two female suicide bombers, whose role also included the supervision of small groups of hostages to and from the bathroom. Other terrorists were dispersed in classrooms and the cafeteria, with the main leaders spending most of their time in the library and the second floor teachers' room, where televisions and the remote detonation mechanism for the daisy chain of explosive devices were also located.

The initial response to the incident consisted of a brief shoot-out between armed parents, who were the first ones to arrive at the scene, and the hostage-takers. As soon as the terrorists warned that they would kill ten hostages for every single one of them killed, the shooting stopped. Soldiers and policemen only started arriving at the scene an hour and a half into the siege, despite the main police station being located a mere 200 metres from the school. It was later reported that the late arrival of policemen was caused by the duty officer, who held the key to the weapons locker, not being located for a full

²¹ The best works on the Beslan events include: Uwe Buse, Ullrich Fichtner, Mario Kaiser, Uwe Klusmann, Walter Mayr, and Christian Neef, 'Putin's Ground Zero', *Der Spiegel*, 27 December 2004, pp 65–101; John B Dunlop, 'Beslan: Russia's 9/11?', The American Committee for Peace in Chechnya and The Jamestown Foundation, October 2005; C J Chivers, 'The School: The inside story of the 2004 attack in Beslan', *Esquire*, June 2006, Volume 145, Issue 6.

²² Plater-Zyberk, *Op cit.*

²³ Thereby breaking the ground rules.

forty minutes.²⁴ The operational command centre was set up nearby in the Technical School Number Eight, and was headed by the President of North Ossetia, Aleksandr Dzosokhov. Several hours after the takeover, two Deputy Directors of the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB), Vladimir Pronichev and Vladimir Anisimov, arrived from Moscow along with several other officials and set up another headquarters.

At this time, it has been reported that the terrorists began calling from the windows for the release of some of the attackers arrested in the June raid on Nazran, Ingushetia.²⁵ However, this demand does not figure anywhere in the official record of the negotiations. Initial telephone contact was allegedly handled by a local FSB negotiator, Vitalii Zangionov.²⁶ He spoke to a man, who on the inside was known as Ali, but for the negotiations used the name, 'Sheikhu'. In the initial conversation, the negotiator focused on the issue of providing medical help for the injured, and offered to get the terrorists access to the media.²⁷ Ali responded mockingly: 'Why would I need a doctor – I'm not ill. Why would I need journalists? I did not come here to shoot a movie.'

In this initial conversation, Ali also demanded Alslanbek Aslachanov, Putin's special advisor on Chechnya, to come to Beslan for negotiations. In an apparent attempt to stall for time, the negotiator raised the issue that Aslachanov was in Moscow, to which Ali replied: 'Airplanes don't fly in Moscow or what?' He was subsequently offered something else, to which he answered, 'I don't

decide these things. I'm just the press secretary. Let me check with the emir.'²⁸

From the very start, it was clear the terrorists were instructed by their leadership to speak only to high-level officials. According to hostages that sat close to Ali, he spoke with someone on the telephone and ended the conversation by saying: 'I will only talk to the President.' His phone rang again fifteen to twenty minutes later, but it was not the President, it was his aide. To this, Ali immediately ended the call.²⁹ Also, efforts to engage Mufti Ruslan Valgatov, religious leader of North Ossetia's Muslim minority, with the terrorists were refused. He was threatened with death if he tried to approach the school. In the meantime, the authorities compiled their first list of hostages, and publicly announced that there were only 120 of them.

Around this time, Dr Larisa Mamitova was treating two of the hostage-takers, who were shot in the initial takeover by one of the fathers with his pistol. During this interaction, Mamitova carefully asked her patients about their intentions and goals, and was told that the objective of the siege was peace for Chechnya and recognition for the fact that Chechen women and children were also suffering. Mamitova offered her help in communicating with the authorities, and was summoned to the school's library to meet with the leader of the group, Ruslan Khuchbarov (a.k.a. 'Polkovnik'). He pointed to a chair next to him and started fishing in his pockets, first taking out a drawing of the plan of the school, then putting it back. Polkovnik eventually found the piece of paper he was look-

²⁴ Buse, Fichtner, Kaiser, Klusmann, Mayr, and Neef, *Op cit.*, pp 65–101.

²⁵ On 21 June 2004, Basayev personally commanded more than 200 of his fighters in the attack on the now former Ingushetian capitol of Nazran. The attackers wore local police uniforms and set up roadblocks at which they stopped and killed the real police officers who raced to reinforce their colleagues. Nearly 100 people, including several ministers died before the fighters withdrew and disappeared in the largest Chechen operation since 1999.

²⁶ Testimony of Vitalii Zangionov in the Nur-Pashi Kulayev trial, 26 January 2006.

²⁷ There is no public record of the actual talks, but hostages who sat in Ali's proximity agree on the responses he provided.

²⁸ This conversation was heard by several hostages sitting in Ali's proximity.

²⁹ 'Chief Beslan gunman described', *Caucasian Knot*, 4 August 2005.

ing for – it was a list of telephone numbers. He then gave Mamitova another piece of paper and started dictating a message which she took down:

'8-928-738-33-374 [telephone number used by Polkovnik]

We want negotiations with President of the Republic Dzhosokhov, Zaizikov, President of Ingushetia and Roshal, children's doctor. If they kill any one of us, we will shoot fifty people to pieces. If they injure any one of us, we will kill twenty people. If they kill five of us, we will blow everything up. If they turn off the lights, even for a minute, we will shoot ten people to pieces.'

Mamitova was then placed under a sniper's crosshairs and sent outside to hand over the note. Shortly thereafter, Alsanbek Aslachanov, Putin's advisor on Chechnya, called the school. According to him, he said: 'I'm getting ready to leave. There are things for us to discuss. Are you ready to talk to me?' He was greeted with an angry reply: 'Why do you lie all the time?! We have over 1,200 people here, 70 per cent of them children. People have been killed already and you are talking about "things to discuss?" If you go on like this, we will start shooting them and then you'll see how serious things are.'³⁰

At the start, the terrorists selected two groups of men and led them outside the gym. One group was tasked to barricade windows, while the other was forced to kneel in the corridor with their hands behind their backs facing the wall. The group barricading windows never returned. Once finished, they were led into a classroom on the second floor, lined up against the wall and then shot, their bodies later thrown out of the window.

As the incident progressed, tensions mounted even further. In the afternoon, the hostages overheard an argument between the terrorists and their leader, in which the

female attackers in particular expressed displeasure in holding children hostage. Around 1600, one of the suicide bombers detonated – killing five or six of the men lined up in the hallway and injuring many more. The cause of the detonation is still a point of contention. According to one version, the woman was detonated remotely by Polkovnik because of her disobedience. But, since the bomber detonated in a doorway, also killing the other suicide bomber and another terrorist in the process, it seems more likely that the detonation was an accident.³¹ The dead hostages were carried upstairs and the injured were ordered to join them. Once in the classroom, a terrorist sprayed the injured men with gunfire, and their dead bodies were thrown out of the window. At this point, the number of dead hostages had already reached twenty-one.

In the meantime, negotiations continued as Mikhail Gutseriev – the former speaker of the Russian State Duma and President of the 'Rusneft' oil company – called the school, claiming to have been empowered by Putin himself to lead the negotiations. After an attempt to speak Ingush, Gutseriev was rebuffed and instructed to speak only in Russian. His suggestion for a Muslim cleric to enter into negotiations was allegedly rejected, as was the offer to exchange the children for the release of the thirty-one terrorists arrested in the Nazran raid.³² According to the now former President of Ossetia, Aleksandr Dzhosokhov, a deal had almost been reached, but at the last moment, the terrorists backed out. When Gutseriev asked about specific demands, Sheikhu suggested that they be handed over in writing. In this context, the name of Ruslan Aushev, former Ingushetian President and a highly respected

³⁰ Aslanbek Aslakhanov interviewed in Kevin Sim's documentary, 'Beslan: Siege of School Number One', *Wide Angle*, 2005.

³¹ Further, the other terrorists prayed immediately afterwards by the bodies of their dead colleagues, which is something that would not happen if they were considered traitors.

³² This incident is discussed in more detail in Part Four.

figure in the Caucasus, reportedly came up for the first time.³³

After 1900 another man demanded by the terrorists for negotiations, Dr Leonid Roshal, claims to have called the school. Never requested to do so by the authorities, he flew to Beslan on his own initiative after being informed of the situation by journalists. Once he reached the school, Roshal called the terrorists expressing his readiness to enter with water and medicines. 'If you come within thirty metres, you'll get a bullet' came the reply. In a strictly one-sided discussion, the threat was made that hostages would be executed in the event the telephone lines were cut off; or if the lines were operating but no one answered when the terrorists called; or if soldiers were spotted outside; or if the lights were turned off. Sheikhu further instructed Roshal that he could only enter the school if he were accompanied by the other three men demanded earlier; if he approached alone he would be shot.

Day 2

In the early morning of 2 September, Mamitova overheard a radio broadcast reporting that only 354 hostages were held inside the school, and that the telephone number provided by the terrorists was non-operational. She asked to see Polkovnik and informed him of the report. 'No one needs you so no one calls. They are still reporting that you are 354 people in total. Perhaps we should leave 354 of you and kill the rest,' was the reply. He also added, 'How can the phone not be working when I am still talking to people on this?' Nonetheless, he took another handset and called the first phone. The call did not go through. Mamitova then suggested sending another note with a new tele-

phone number. Polkovnik tore a piece of paper from a notebook and handed it to Mamitova. 'Write again,' he said and dictated some other telephone numbers. In the middle of dictating, he became angry, took the piece of paper from her, and threw it out. He gave her another one and dictated again: 'Our nerves are at a breaking point...'

That same morning, the authorities attempted a bold move by summoning Luisa Kodzoyeva – the wife of one of the alleged terrorists – to the school, to try to convince her husband to release the children. Perhaps more importantly, the authorities were sending a message that the terrorists' family members could also be found and punished. In a videotape made by the authorities, a part of which was later shown on television, Luisa stated: 'If you are there, let the children go. Help the children; after all, you have five of your own.' However, the first sentence in her statement was not aired: 'Iznaur, I know that you're not there... They forced me.'³⁴ There was no response.³⁵

Inside the school, the terrorists were becoming increasingly angry and frustrated, mainly due to the repeated Government claims made in the media that the number of hostages was 354, and that the hostage-takers had not presented any demands. The hostage-takers saw this as a deliberate attempt to obstruct negotiations, and to justify the launching of an armed assault on the school. The downplaying of the number of hostages was, they believed, supposed to aid the authorities in covering up the number of the victims in the event of a rescue. Infuriated, around noon the terrorists called for a 'dry strike' and stopped giving the hostages water. From this point on, the hostages began to suffer acutely from the lack of food, water and deteriorating conditions inside. Some of the hostages even

³³ Buse, Fichtner, Kaiser, Klusmann, Mayr, and Neef, *Op cit.*, pp 65–101.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp 65–101.

³⁵ Iznaur Kodzoyev would later be killed, not in Beslan in September 2004, but instead, in his native village of Al'tievo in April 2005. This suggests that either Kodzoyev was either not actually present in the school, or that he got away.

began to drink their own urine to quench their thirst.

Just before 1400, the terrorists' mood suddenly changed. They became visibly happy, hugging each other as if they had not seen each other in ages. From the top floor, they announced that the 'big person' was coming in for the negotiations. Near the bathroom, where all the nursing mothers were directed on the first day with their babies, one of the lead terrorists, Vladimir Khodov, offered a hint: 'If they let him come in, maybe we will let the breast-feeding children out.'³⁶ This 'big person' turned out to be Ruslan Aushev, admired General of the Afghan war and former Ingush President. From Khodov's comment, it seems that the terrorists were not sure until the last moment whether he would be permitted to enter. Aushev asked to see the hostages, so he was led to the window on the second floor from where he was shown the corpses of the twenty-one dead men executed on day one. Afterwards, Aushev and Polkovnik held a discussion in the teachers' room. They spoke about evacuating the infant children and collecting the bodies of those men he had just seen.³⁷ At the end of the meeting, Aushev was given a handwritten note dated 30 August 2004 addressed to 'President Putin from Allah's slave Shamil Basayev'. He was asked to read the message out loud to make sure everything was clear:³⁸

Vladimir Putin, you were not the one to start the war, but you could be the one to end it - that is, if you find the courage and resolve to act like de Gaulle. We are offering you peace on a mutually beneficial basis in line with the principle of 'independence for security'. We can guarantee that if you withdraw the troops and recognize Chechen independence, then we will not strike any political, military or economic deals with anyone against Russia; we will not have any foreign military bases, even temporary ones; we will not sup-

port or finance groups fighting the Russian Federation; we will join the Commonwealth of Independent States; we will stay in the rouble zone; we could sign the Collective Security Treaty, although we would prefer the status of a neutral state; we can guarantee that all Russian Muslims will refrain from armed methods of struggle against the Russian Federation for at least ten to fifteen years on condition that freedom of religion be respected... The Chechen nation is involved in the national liberation struggle for its freedom and independence and for its preservation. It is not fighting to humiliate Russia or destroy it. As a free nation, we are interested in a strong neighbour. We are offering you peace and the choice is yours.

The terrorists set a deadline for the Kremlin to respond by the morning of 4 September.³⁹

Aushev promised to hand over the letter, and asked for the release of young infants. 'You also have children, don't you?' he said.⁴⁰ Khuchbarov did, and so released the nursing mothers along with one baby each, some of them had to leave their other children behind. After leaving the school with the twenty-six released hostages, Aushev immediately transmitted the text of a letter to the Kremlin with an urgent plea for negotiations. In addition, a list of specific demands was also handed over in writing. These demands were never made public, but available evidence suggests that the list corresponded to the one later provided by Basayev himself:

- *We demand that the war in Chechnya be stopped immediately and that the withdrawal of forces be carried out;*
- *We insist that Putin immediately resigns from his post as President of the Russian Federation; and*
- *We insist that all hostages, be it children or adults, go on hunger strike in support of our demands.*

Also, following conditions were reportedly set:

- *We will give water to everyone provided*

³⁶ Chivers, *Op cit.*

³⁷ 'Inquiry Finds Chechen Separatist Leader Was Given Chance To Intervene at Beslan', RIA, 3 March 2005.

³⁸ Interview with Ruslan Aushev, Moscow, November 2005.

³⁹ Plater-Zyberk, *Op cit.*

⁴⁰ Aushev Interview, *Op cit.*

Putin immediately stops the war, sends all his troops to the barracks and begins the withdrawal of his troops;

- *We will give food to everyone provided Putin begins the actual withdrawal of his troops;*
- *We will release children under the age of ten as soon as they start withdrawing the troops from the mountains;*
- *We will set others free after they complete the withdrawal of the troops; and*
- *If Putin submits a letter of resignation, we will release all the children and go back to Chechnya.*

In the evening, Aslakhanov called the school again. The conversation was very structured and to the point. The terrorists stated he could only come to Beslan to negotiate if Putin granted him the authority to do so. Aslakhanov answered affirmatively and pointed out that ‘some demands are unrealistic and you know it. Some we will fulfill. I’ll talk to the President.’ Sheikhu replied: ‘If you do, tomorrow at 3pm, we’ll hold an official meeting.’ According to his own account, Aslakhanov then spoke to President Putin, who allegedly stated that ‘the children’s lives must be saved at all costs. Agree to everything. But the first two demands cannot be met.’⁴¹ This is an extremely interesting point because if Aslakhanov did indeed talk about the possibility of satisfying some of the terrorists’ demands, it clearly contradicts the official claim that no demands were made. Similarly, Putin’s comment about the unacceptable nature of the ‘first two demands’ confirms their existence. It is not clear, however, what the President meant by ‘agree to everything’. If the first two demands – withdrawing troops from Chechnya and his own resignation – were unacceptable, then there was nothing else to agree to but the demand that hostages go on a hunger strike. So while the statement ‘agree to everything but the

first two demands’ by itself may be interpreted as evidence of the Russian leader’s willingness to offer almost any concession in order to save the lives of the hostages, in the context of the actual list of demands, it translated into agreeing to absolutely nothing.

Another noteworthy point is the discrepancy between the officials’ claims in terms of the course of the negotiations, and the desperate reactions of the terrorists inside. For instance, while Aslakhanov’s statement seems to suggest that frantic negotiations were going on, inside the school the terrorists complained to the hostages that nobody wanted to speak with them. For instance, Polkovnik even sought out Mamitova and told her that if there were any members of Parliament or other politicians that she knew, she should call them. Mamitova replied that she did not know anyone, but pleaded to try calling her colleagues at the emergency room, perhaps they could help. After being allowed to call and explain the conditions inside, she offered the woman she spoke with the opportunity to come to the school and see for herself. Polkovnik set a deadline of ten minutes and offered a guarantee of safety, but no one ever appeared. Mamitova then remembered hearing from someone in the gym that the children of the North Ossetian Parliament speaker Mamsurov were also among the hostages. Through Lydia Tsaliyeva, the school’s headmistress, the kids were identified and summoned to the teachers’ room. Before they left the gym, Ali took aside the boy, hugged him and kissed him on the head. ‘Don’t worry. Nothing bad is going to happen to you. We just need you to help us jumpstart the negotiations. Talk with your daddy and tell him what’s going on.’⁴²

When Mamitova and the children finally managed to get through to Mamsurov, he replied: ‘The Government has ordered me to leave my parental emotions at home.’

⁴¹ Aslanbek Aslakhanov interview, *Op cit.*

⁴² Interview with Larisa Kudzyeva, Beslan, November 2005.

Mamitova then pleaded for Mamsurov to contact Ossetian President Dzhosokhov and ask him to call the school within the next ten minutes. Mamsurov agreed. Ten long minutes passed by without anyone calling. Visibly upset, Polkovnik then turned on the TV. The Government media were still reporting that there were only 354 hostages, and Dr Roshal was claiming that the children were not in immediate danger, and that they could survive eight or nine days without water. The TV station also said that Aushev led out twenty-six mothers and children. To this, Polkovnik exploded: 'We released just a couple of people and you're already claiming twenty-six! And then you'll say forty more, seventy more! We're not going to release another person again!' Polkovnik then sent Mamitova and the children back to the gym. 'Go, nobody needs you,'⁴³ he said.

In the evening, Ali came into the gym visibly distressed. When asked by hostage Larisa Kudzyeva what had happened, he replied: 'I don't want to lift my foot off the trigger,'⁴⁴ but I'm forced to do it. They don't want to talk. The answer is no. They told me that Russia will never talk to terrorists. That the problem does not exist.' When she asked what that meant, Ali replied: 'I don't know what that means. They told me I have a day and a half to sort it out.' Kudzyeva countered: 'That can't be. Maybe you didn't understand.' 'No, I understood. I understood everything.'⁴⁵

The authorities have a different story. According to official sources, Roshal called the terrorists in the evening of day two and offered them free passage. The offer was,

allegedly, bluntly refused. And yet, officials apparently cleared the way for the terrorists to leave by ordering a group of policemen to move their post back and not to interfere with any passing terrorists. According to one of these policemen, two terrorists later walked out of the building and surveyed the countryside, and then they shouted, '*Allahu Akbar*', shot into the air and retreated back to the school.⁴⁶

In the Command Centre, several ideas were reportedly being discussed, including the signing of a fake decree about pulling troops from Chechnya. But the idea was quickly abandoned as it was assumed the terrorists would need to see more evidence of a pull-out on TV, which would be a point of no return.⁴⁷ Aushev also suggested engaging Aslan Maskhadov, the last elected President of the separatist Government, into negotiations. Maskhadov had publicly condemned the attack and this offered a glimpse of hope. On the other hand, the Kremlin had implicated Maskhadov in previous acts of terrorism, and so providing him an opportunity to appear as a saviour by involving him in this crucial role was hardly going to be acceptable to the Kremlin. Nevertheless, both Dzhosokhov and Aushev contacted Maskhadov's envoy, Zakayev, in London.⁴⁸ The reply was that Maskhadov was ready to assume the negotiating role, but asked for a guarantee that he would be provided unhindered access to the school and that the Russians would not kill him. By midnight, at the civilian command centre,⁴⁹ an agreement was allegedly drafted, with key components centering on negotiations between Russian

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ The terrorists had a book that was rigged as a switch to the explosive daisy chain. One terrorist always had his foot on this book. If he lifted the foot, detonation would occur.

⁴⁵ Kudzyeva Interview, *Op cit.*

⁴⁶ Buse, Fichtner, Kaiser, Klusmann, Mayr, and Neef, *Op cit.*, pp 65–101.

⁴⁷ Александр ХИНШТЕЙН: 'Раб Аллага Басаев его превосходительству Путину...' Московский Комсомолец, 11 September 2004.

⁴⁸ According to Zakayev, the very first person to contact him was the journalist, Anna Politkovskaya.

⁴⁹ A chaotic situation existed in which several different command centers were established, each running independently.

leaders and Maskhadov, a plan for Chechen autonomy, and a gradual troop withdrawal.⁵⁰

Day 3

The morning of 3 September brought some optimistic news: Maskhadov had sent a message through Zakayev confirming that he was ready to fly to Beslan to negotiate. The local authorities responded by announcing that they needed only two hours to organize his safe passage and travel arrangements.⁵¹ Around noon, Ossetian Presidential spokesman, Lev Dzugayev told the journalists: 'Important new faces are about to enter the negotiation process, they will arrive soon.' In addition, he also announced that this step had the full support of the Kremlin and that an agreement had also been made with the terrorists to collect the bodies of the hostages killed on day one. Only an hour after this announcement was made, the storming started, leading some sources to speculate that the explosions that triggered the mayhem were no accident, and that their purpose was to deny Maskhadov the chance to come in and save the day.⁵² The Federal authorities in turn, categorically denied Maskhadov's willingness to come to Beslan to negotiate.⁵³ Further, after Beslan, they accused him of actually planning the attack and put a \$10 million bounty on his head.⁵⁴

The small glimpse of optimism that was present outside the school following Dzugayev's announcement was not shared by the people inside the gym. Conditions were rapidly deteriorating with at least two children on the verge of death by dehydration. The overall feeling shared by everyone

in the school was that something must happen soon; the hostages were becoming increasingly uncontrollable, and the terrorists knew that based on past experience an assault would start before long. Some hostages noticed that the number of terrorists had gotten smaller overnight, with some specific individuals nowhere to be seen.⁵⁵ The desperation of the remaining terrorists was evident. They were acting increasingly aggressive, became even less responsive to hostages' anxious pleas for water, and their anger grew with their inability to settle the hostages down.

Just before 1300, Mamitova was told that a lorry would be coming to collect the bodies of the dead hostages. Polkovnik told her to stand by the window and let the people in the lorry know the condition of the children. He wanted her to tell them the children were very ill and that, for three days, the terrorists had not killed anyone. At 1302, the lorry approached and several shots were fired. Almost simultaneously, the first explosion inside the school ensued, followed by a large explosion exactly twenty-two seconds later. Shortly thereafter, chaos erupted. According to the sole captured terrorist Nur-Pasha Kulayev's court testimony, Polkovnik ran into the gym following the first two explosions and screamed that a sniper had taken out the man who was standing on the book rigged as a detonator to the bombs. At the same time, he was speaking to someone on his mobile and yelled, 'What have you done, you want to storm? Do you know how many children there are? You lied to us. You bear responsibility for everything.' Gutseriev on the other side said: 'But there's no assault!' Polovnik replied: 'That's it. We're blowing up'. After that he smashed the

⁵⁰ Buse, Fichtner, Kaiser, Klusmann, Mayr, and Neef, *Op cit.*, pp 65-101.

⁵¹ Interview with Israil Totoonti, Vladikavkaz, November 2005.

⁵² 'New Details Emerge on Maschadov's Bid to Mediate in Beslan', *Chechnya Weekly*, Volume VII, Issue 1, 5 January 2006.

⁵³ 'Russia: Beslan Inquiry Chief Says Maskhadov Missed Chance To Be True Leader', *Mayak Radio*, 2 April 2005.

⁵⁴ Maschadov was then killed on 8 March 2005 in the village of Tolstoy-Yurt, near Grozny.

⁵⁵ This included Ali.

phone and ordered his men to shoot everyone. 'It doesn't matter, they will take pity on no one.'⁵⁶

By this point, the firefight had become irreversible. At 1813, one final contact was

made with the hostage-takers. 'It's all your fault. Say "hi" to your Putin!' Around 0200, more than twelve hours since the initial explosions, the last shots were fired.

⁵⁶ Kulayev trial testimony, *Op cit.*

Chapter 3: The Failure of Negotiations

This section of the report will analyze the potential of negotiations as the best possible tool for the resolution of the incident. Firstly, the motivations and strategic calculus of the attackers will be examined. What were they trying to achieve? What was the desired outcome? What was their best alternative to a negotiated agreement (BATNA)?⁵⁷ Without addressing these questions, it is impossible to design an appropriate negotiation strategy. Secondly, a commonly-used analytical framework for assessing the negotiability of hostage incidents will be used to identify the negative indicators of volatility, as well as the comparatively positive indicators of de-escalation that were present. Simultaneously, the weaknesses of a mechanical application of this framework to Beslan-style incidents will be identified. And finally, this section will analyze the successes and missed opportunities in the handling of the Beslan incident in order to draw lessons for the resolution of similar crises in the future.

Goals of the Attack

To gain some insight into the terrorists' calculations prior to launching the Beslan operation, their selection of target, tactics used and overall strategy must be assessed.

The target was indeed striking, and it was clearly designed to raise the stakes. In Dubrovka, the Russian leadership did not shy away from storming a theatre full of

hostages in the middle of Moscow, killing 129 people in the process. Taking hundreds of schoolchildren hostage would introduce even greater decision-making dilemmas and greater public pressure *not* to storm the school, leaving the Kremlin with few options but to negotiate. In Basayev's own words, Moscow or St Petersburg would have been more attractive locations for the operation, and he allegedly even considered attacking the two locations at once. However, due to operational and financial limitations, a target substitute had to be made. Ossetia provided the ideal candidate because 'it is Russia's fort post in the North Caucasus, and all bad things that come to [Chechens] come from the territory of Ossetia, with the silent consent of its population.'⁵⁸ The selection of Beslan in particular made sense, as the School Number One was one of the largest in the region and where even the Ossetian elite sent their children.⁵⁹

The tactic used in the attacks was also striking. Obviously, there was the idea of taking hostages as a means of creating a 'good', which could then be used to 'trade' for political concessions. As mentioned above, taking a large number of children hostage significantly raises the stakes. Fortifying the location, placing a large number of explosive devices throughout the school, booby trapping possible entrances and monitoring them with remote control surveillance cameras,⁶⁰ deployment of

⁵⁷ The purpose of a BATNA is to formulate the likely outcome of the situation should negotiations fail. This should be done beforehand in order to determine whether it is advisable to even start negotiating. During the negotiations, it is desirable to strengthen one's own BATNA, while making the counterpart's BATNA appear as weak as possible.

⁵⁸ Basayev Interview for Channel 4 News, 4 February 2005.

⁵⁹ According to Senator Alexander Torshin who heads the Federal Investigative Committee, the terrorists had a backup school that would have been easier to attack than Beslan in the village of Nesterovskaya in Ingushetia since it was located on a road where the terrorists would not have had to travel from Ingushetia across checkpoints.

⁶⁰ Plater-Zyberk, *Op cit.*

snipers in strategic positions, use of gas masks and sentry dogs in order to prevent the use of anesthetic gas, and other protective measures taken, were designed to overtly minimize the perceived chances of a rescue operation success. Few hostage crises in history have presented the response teams with such a formidable adversary. The apparent suicidal tactic selected for the operation was also significant. First of all, the repeated expression of determination to die during the incident was aimed at denying the counterpart's threat-making capacity: in essence, the proclamation of the desire to die weakens the deterrent value of threats by the Government to resolve the situation forcefully.⁶¹ Further, the seeming irrationality of suicidal operations is useful in attracting extensive media coverage. In turn, that coverage may prompt popular, even global interest in understanding and investigating the motivations behind such an act. As a consequence, the group's cause might be perceived as just, as people question how their plight – and that of the constituency they represent – could be so humiliating and unacceptable that for them death is preferable to life under such conditions. This is especially true in cases where the suicide attackers include women, as has frequently been the case in Chechen operations. This was apparently the element that the terrorists were trying to capitalize on in Beslan as well. On numerous occasions they would engage the hostages with questions like: 'You know why our women sacrifice themselves like that?' or 'Do you think our women blow themselves up because they like it?' In addition, it is also clear that featuring images of female suicide bombers in their video footage from the site was particularly important for public relations purposes; after the original two bombers died on day one of the siege, one of

the terrorists approached Larisa Kudzyeva with an offer to release her children if she agreed to put on the *hijab* and a suicide belt.⁶²

Overall, the goals of the operation were multiple. Basayev's success in Budyonnovsk had convinced him that large scale hostage-takings can be instrumentally successful in forcing the Russians to the negotiating table. At the same time, he also learnt from past incidents that the Russian leadership can *always* be expected to launch a rescue operation – typically, as noted earlier, around the end of day three of the crisis – and that these actions produce on average more than 130 deaths. In light of these experiences, Basayev's explanation of the goals of Beslan was logical: 'We came there not to kill people but to stop the war, and if it works out that way, to force the Russian leadership to kill its own civilians, if only through this to force the lying and vain world to understand what is really going on, to lay bare our wound and pain, because people don't see what is happening in Chechnya. They see it only when huge actions like this one occur on the territory of Russia itself.'⁶³ From a negotiation perspective, this logic is highly troublesome, as Basayev has been able to convert a barricade hostage scenario that, under normal circumstances, would not be so favourable to the hostage-takers, into a 'win-win' situation. The logic was simple: If the Russians satisfy the demands, Basayev wins. If the Russians storm the building and a large number of hostages die, he also wins. Finally, the desire, or at least the acceptability of dying a martyr's death on behalf of hostage-takers then erases any possible downsides.

There was yet another strategic goal that would be fulfilled in Beslan regardless of the outcome of the incident: that was the provocation of violent retaliations by the predominantly Orthodox Christian Ossetians

⁶¹ Zartman, William, 'Negotiating Effectively With Terrorists' in Barry Rubin, ed., *The Politics of Counterterrorism* (Washington, D.C.: The Johns Hopkins Foreign Policy Institute, 1990).

⁶² Interview with Larisa Kudzyeva, Beslan, November 2005.

⁶³ Basayev Interview for Channel 4 News, 4 February 2005.

against the Muslim Ingush minority in the province.⁶⁴ This would, in turn, trigger a large-scale Christian-Muslim confrontation in the Caucasus, not only taking the pressure off Chechnya, but also creating a nightmare scenario for Moscow.⁶⁵ In light of this aim, and in consideration of Basayev's long-term strategic goal of expanding the Chechen conflict throughout the region, attacking in Ossetia with a team featuring a majority of Ingush attackers was a logical strategic choice, since more than 600 people had already died in ethnic clashes between both groups in 1992.⁶⁶ The resurrection of such historical conflicts may only need gentle persuasion. Although official versions deny this, an armed group of Ossetians heading to Ingushetia to avenge Beslan was actually stopped by Federal troops at the Nazran checkpoint shortly after the incident.⁶⁷ Since Beslan, the tensions between the two ethnic groups have followed an escalatory pattern.

Besides understanding the strategic calculus of the masterminds of the operation, it is also important to examine the profiles and backgrounds of the executors. It is they, essentially, who will make the final decision in terms of executing hostages, dying, surrendering or taking up an offer of free passage. And although ideology-driven hostage incidents typically feature little independent decision-making on behalf of the executors, based on analysis of Basayev's claim of responsibility, it seems that this element was present at Beslan, as the demand to release the imprisoned attackers from the Nazran raid appears to have been at the executors' own initiative.⁶⁸ Understanding the personality and group dynamics of the hostage-taking team inside the school is therefore

vital to designing a suitable negotiation strategy.

This report is not the appropriate forum to provide in-depth biographies of each of the Beslan terrorists, which by themselves would provide enough material for a separate book. As a result, only a basic overview can be given. The official number of terrorists was thirty-two – two of them were women – although hostages claim the actual number was much higher, possibly as many as fifty or seventy.⁶⁹ Published reports, interviews with investigators, hostages and the terrorists' family members reveal the following detail: some of the terrorists had a long history of fighting in the separatist struggle, others were violent criminals who escaped punishment in the lawless regions of Chechnya or Ingushetia, only later to join the rebels. Some were fanatical Islamists, others seem to have been driven by more personal grievances and revenge, whilst one was an Orthodox Christian, who converted to Islam under the influence of his brother. Most of the terrorists had some family members, who were either killed or kidnapped and tortured by the Russians in Chechnya and Ingushetia. Some had a history of conducting terrorist attacks against civilians, others had previously only killed soldiers. Their roles in the crisis were apparently different: while some attackers were clearly destined for sacrifice, others were almost certainly meant to survive. Some held important positions in Basayev's *Riyadus-Salikhin Suicide Fighters Battalion* (RAS) and participated in the planning of the operation, others were only marginal players, who did not have advance knowledge of their target – a fact which led to the argument among the terror-

⁶⁴ Nur Pasha Kulayev interviewed on Russian NTV station, 4 September 2004.

⁶⁵ Šéf teroristů z Beslanu uniká, tvrdí tisk. *Idnes*, 10 September 2004.

⁶⁶ Nivat, Anne, *Chienné De Guerre*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2001) p. 92.

⁶⁷ Interviews with local residents, Beslan and Nazran, November 2006.

⁶⁸ Plater-Zyberk, *Op cit.*

⁶⁹ The official number is the result of thirty-one bodies being found with one terrorist being captured alive. The hostages, however, report seeing between fifty and seventy terrorists, suggesting that some were able to escape. In addition, only seventeen of the bodies were positively identified, and consequently, only a limited profiling sample is available.

ists about the morality of taking children hostage.⁷⁰ This overall diversity in background, prior experience, rank, division of labour and differing fates brings an important element into the analysis of negotiation options and strategies. Did the schisms inside the group perhaps provide an opportunity for the negotiators to drive a wedge between the hostage-takers?

Assessment of Volatility

From the perspective of the accepted crisis negotiation framework, it was clear from the beginning that resolving the Beslan crisis peacefully would be incredibly difficult. In fact, as mentioned in the introduction, traditional analytical checklists would place Beslan into the category of non-negotiable incidents, requiring a tactical resolution. However, upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent that there were a number of dynamics present in the crisis that made the applicability of the commonly-used generic incident assessment forms obsolete. Some key indicators of volatility are identified below.

The first indicator of volatility evident was the careful planning and premeditated nature of the attack. Deliberate hostage crises are naturally more difficult to negotiate, and the process is likely to be significantly longer in duration than in the case of spontaneous hostage incidents, like a surprise police intervention during a bank robbery or a domestic violence situation. Quite simply, if the hostage-takers are mentally and physically *prepared to be in the given situation*, the less likely they are to start second guessing their decision to take hostages. This, however, does not mean that we should automatically

conclude that this shift will not take place. It only means that changing the terrorists' expectations and resolve will need much more time than is the case in most other hostage incidents. Further, while the Beslan terrorists did bring with them vitamin supplements and rations for at least three days, not everyone was comfortable with the idea of taking children hostage. This provided some window of opportunity for planting a seed of doubt in the minds of at least some terrorists.

Secondly, the presence of multiple perpetrators available to handle the negotiations made the situation even more unpredictable: building rapport with hostage-takers is much more challenging if they are under direct pressure from their peers and if they can effectively negate the formation of a personal relationship with the negotiator by simply switching representatives. This was also the case in Beslan, where the negotiations were handled by at least two different terrorists. Further, they also cleverly employed the 'deferment of authority' principle, in which the person who speaks is never the one who can make the final decision. This is one of the principles that is employed by hostage negotiation teams, and which is designed to allow the negotiator never to fully commit to any deals, without consulting his superior. The negotiator can then deny an agreement previously reached without losing face by pointing to the decision-maker as the one responsible for the change of heart. This makes negotiations more difficult than when the decision-maker is confronted directly. Another reason why the presence of group hostage-takers is considered an indicator of volatility is that due to the psychological process known as 'groupthink',⁷¹ group

⁷⁰ Blinova, Yekaterina and Trofimov, Anton, 'Beslan Hostage-takers May Have Included Arrested Terrorist, Basayev Link Likely', *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 8 September 2004.

⁷¹ *Groupthink* is a decision-making process used to explain why groups sometimes make decisions that are more radical than the sum of all individual opinions within the group. An excellent description and application of some of the *groupthink* processes to the terrorism context can be found in Albert Bandura, 'Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement,' in Walter Reich, editor, *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press 1998, 2nd edition pp 161–191.

hostage-takers in general tend to be more decisive than individuals when it comes to killing hostages.

Another volatile element of the crisis was the fact that the hostage-takers were well-armed and heavily brutalized. Security precautions taken by the militants made an assault on the school virtually impossible without a significant loss of life, and the ruthless history of a number of these terrorists made their claims of being prepared to summarily execute the hostages believable. Further, the fact that hostages died in the initial takeover was also highly negative. Hostage deaths in the early stages usually complicate subsequent negotiation efforts by tarnishing the hostage-takers' 'clean record'. If hostage-takers maintain a 'clean record', negotiators can facilitate it to secure a surrender or right of free passage in the final stages of an incident. On the other hand, ample evidence exists that death of hostages throughout *terrorist* hostage-taking incidents does not automatically create an insurmountable barrier to a negotiated agreement in this context. Still, decision-makers naturally become less amenable to pursuing negotiations once hostages have been killed, and there are greater legal and public opinion obstacles to letting the terrorists leave freely as well, thereby complicating negotiation efforts.

Another important factor was that the stronger male hostages were separated out of the group and transferred to another location. This filtering process not only signaled the anticipation of a tactical assault – holding hostages at different locations makes an assault more difficult, as multiple tactical teams must attack all locations simultaneously in order to limit the risk to hostages held at other locations – but it also allowed for a quick 'discriminate' execution of hostages if it became necessary to pressure the authorities. The slaying of these men, who were perceived not only as a dangerous threat to the hostage-takers due to their physical ability to overpower but also as morally 'involved' in the violence in Chechnya and Ingushetia,

would have been psychologically easier and also less politically dangerous for the terrorists than killing women and children. Tragically, this proved to be the case during the afternoon of day one, when the terrorists did in fact execute several men to demonstrate the seriousness of their threats. Later, additional people died in the suicide blast, and the ones injured were also finished off and thrown out of the window. This extremely bold measure, rarely seen in past hostage crises, constitutes one of the most important dilemmas for the future.

The current *modus operandi* of crisis response teams adheres to the principle that until hostages start dying, negotiations take priority. Once hostages start being executed, the 'last resort option' of a full-scale rescue operation is employed. But as noted earlier, in cases like Beslan, the rescue operation only has a miniscule probability of success. Several questions arise: Is it better to risk more deaths resulting from the rescue, or to continue negotiations? Does the execution of several hostages constitute a sure sign of absolute non-negotiability? Because Beslan-type incidents have been so rare, we can only speculate. Similarly, could the absence of executions of women and children be interpreted as a positive sign of possible restraint in terms of *indiscriminate executions* on behalf of the terrorists? What does the absence of executions on days two and three tell us about the prospects of an eventual successful negotiated settlement? These questions are by no means meant to suggest a moral relativity on the issue, or to imply that lives of male hostages are less important than those of women and children. But on utilitarian grounds, decision-makers need to ask themselves: which approach can result in the deaths of fewer people? A storming of the location or further negotiations? All of these questions need to be analyzed and the basis upon which the current hostage rescue 'cookbooks' rest needs to be re-evaluated.

The third possible volatile element was the absence of change in the terrorists'

demands over time. In 'negotiable incidents', hostage-takers typically start 'bidding' high but reduce their demands as the incident progresses and as their exhaustion induces a regression to higher-order needs, such as hunger, thirst and sleep. If such a process does not occur over a growing period of time, the contemporary paradigm suggests that the chances of a negotiated solution decrease considerably.⁷² However, this paradigm is again based on past experience in non-terrorist hostage incidents, where ideology or religion is not involved, and where many of the demands made are not thought out beforehand. In such cases, it is not surprising that hostage-takers modify their demands over time. With terrorist hostage-takers, who have received a clear set of demands from their leaders and who lock themselves in their position by stating their demands publicly, this process cannot be expected to occur on the same timeline as non-terrorist incidents: the one thing image-conscious terrorists fear the most is the perception of failure. Also, the presence of multiple hostage-takers in cases like Beslan prolongs this process significantly as the hostage-takers not only have the option of resting some of their crew by working in shifts, but they are also able to feed from the energy and determination of their colleagues. As a result of these factors, in combination with the lack of sufficient experience and data on terrorist hostage takings *à la* Beslan, we simply do not know if and when a change in the hostage-takers' demand can be expected to occur. Implicitly, we should not tie ourselves down to specific time horizons and limit our options based on this indicator alone.

Another potentially volatile element present at Beslan was the alleged use of psychotropic substances by the hostage-takers. In general, the presence of alcohol or drugs makes a hostage situation less predictable, sometimes giving the hostage-takers the 'courage' to resort to more radical measures than they normally would. This is one of the reasons why providing drugs or alcohol to hostage-takers is considered a 'non-negotiable demand'. Following the autopsies of the killed Beslan terrorists, investigators claimed twenty-one of the thirty-one gunmen had heroin or morphine in their bloodstreams. Another six allegedly used light drugs ranging from codeine to marijuana.⁷³ According to local prosecutor Nikolai Shepel, tests revealed levels exceeding lethal doses of heroin and morphine in most of the thirty-two terrorists, suggesting that they were drug addicts. Alexander Torshin, who heads the Federal Investigative Committee, even claimed that the terrorists used some kind of a 'new generation drug' that allowed the terrorists to continue fighting, despite being badly wounded and, presumably, in great pain.⁷⁴ However, all of these allegations are being strongly disputed by the hostages, as well as the North Ossetian Parliamentary Commission, which in its report stated that 'no traces of strong narcotics were found in the bodies of the hostage-takers'. In Beslan, the assertion about 'drug addicts' has long been dismissed as Moscow's attempt to cover up the failure of the authorities to negotiate.⁷⁵ Fascinatingly, even the Beslan terrorists could predict this development; in one of the conversations with Larisa Mamitova, Polkovnik asked whether she saw any drug addicts among them. When she shook her

⁷² Thomas Strentz, *13 Indicators of Volatile Negotiations*, Law and Order, 1991.

⁷³ Nick Paton Walsh, 'Mystery still shrouds Beslan six months on : Theories and rumors fuel relatives' doubt and anger', *The Guardian*, 16 February 2005.

⁷⁴ 'New Drugs Used by Beslan Terrorists Puzzle Russian Experts', *MosNews*, 19 October 2004. <<http://www.mosnews.com/news/2004/10/19/smoking.shtml>>.

⁷⁵ This would not be inconsistent with past cases, as the Kremlin has always attempted to portray Chechen militants as drug addicts, bandits and alcoholics.

head, he replied, 'Remember my words, they will call us drug addicts...' ⁷⁶ Another similarly dubious claim had the terrorists brutally raping young girls inside the school. The hostages themselves not only vigorously denied this story, but described how even the sight of girl's skin 'upset' the gunmen, who demanded that they remained covered up at all times despite the intense heat. ⁷⁷ Similarly, Khodov, when asked by one of the hostages whether he was going to rape her replied defensively: 'We did not come here for this. We don't need it. There's a greater reward for us with *Allah*. The other stuff is simply not interesting to us.' ⁷⁸

Yet in other respects, the behaviour of the terrorists toward the hostages was unusually brutal. After the terrorists stopped giving the hostages water on the second day, some of the hostages resorted to drinking their own urine, vainly seeking relief from the rising temperatures in the packed gym. Despite numerous pleas for water from the hostages, this policy was never changed. Further, at least some of the terrorists clearly demonstrated that they had no psychological obstacles to killing hostages. One of the men injured during the initial takeover was taken away and shot through the knees before his skull was shattered using rifle butts. ⁷⁹ Some of the terrorists even attempted a form of psychological torture on the children: they placed boxes of chocolate in everyone's view to tempt the hungry children, but simultaneously told them: 'Who even touches it will be shot'. ⁸⁰ In addition, Khodov would occasionally beat some of the older boys with his rifle

butt. ⁸¹ And while there were no executions of women and children, the overall behaviour of some of the terrorists vis-à-vis the hostages did not conform in any way to the Stockholm Syndrome – the mutually positive relationship that often develops between hostages and hostage-takers, which typically makes it psychologically more difficult for the latter to harm or kill the former. Again, in this respect as well, there was no uniformity among the members of the team. Hostages agree that only about five or six terrorists behaved especially cruelly, while many others were remembered as 'normal', 'decent', or even 'kind' and 'nice'. Many of the terrorists secretly gave the hostages water and chocolate, or at least looked the other way when they saw some of the hostages violating the ground rules. One of them almost paid for this with his own life when he offered a bottle of water to hostage Marina Khubayeva. Another terrorist walked up and shouted at him: 'Do you want a bullet in your head?' ⁸² At least two of the terrorists even guarded the children from the hail of bullets in the final chaos, risking their own lives in the process. Yet several others opted to shoot at the backs of the children as they attempted to run away. ⁸³ The unfortunate fact was that despite their numerical inferiority, the hostage-takers that were the most brutal, such as Khodov and Khuchbarov, were the leaders of the group. The absence of psychological barriers to killing hostages on the part of these men made the situation extremely volatile.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly,

⁷⁶ John B. Dunlop, 'Beslan: Russia's 9/11?' The American Committee for Peace in Chechnya and The Jamestown Foundation, October 2005.

⁷⁷ See for instance, 'Canticle_of_Deborah: They Knifed Babies, They Raped Girls', *Sunday Mirror*, 5 September 2004 <<http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1208007/posts>>.

⁷⁸ Interview with Larisa Kudzieva, Beslan, November 2005.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

⁸⁰ Interview with Aneta Gadieva, Vladikavkaz, July 2005.

⁸¹ Mark Franchetti and Matthew Campbell, 'How a repressed village misfit became the butcher of Beslan', *The Sunday Times*, 12 September 2004, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2089-1257953_1,00.html>.

⁸² *ibid.*

⁸³ Testimony of hostage Svetlana Dzheriyeva at the Kulayev trial.

the terrorists' repeatedly declared desire to die and become martyrs suggested a high level of volatility. One of the identified pre-conditions of negotiability of hostage incidents is the desire on behalf of the hostage-taker to live – if the hostage-takers are indifferent to staying alive, it is difficult to make them focus on personal safety, thereby drawing the attention away from their original demands. Also, the threat of force posed by the hostage rescue unit becomes much less powerful a bargaining tool, as survival plays no part in the hostage-takers' calculation of the outcome. Under circumstances in which the captors see it as their primary objective to kill themselves and take as many of their victims as possible with them, negotiation has very little chance of success. However, such situations are extremely rare, as this objective is more readily served by operations involving the tactics of suicide bombings and *fedayeen* shooting sprees. In barricade hostage incidents, terrorists are typically extremely sensitive to their own security during a high-pressure stand-off.

Contrary to popular opinion, the terrorists in Beslan were indeed concerned about their safety.⁸⁴ One of the threats continually repeated during the crisis was the threat to kill fifty hostages for every terrorist killed, and twenty hostages for every terrorist injured. Throughout the conversations with hostages, it also became apparent that some of the terrorists did expect to survive. At one point Khodov, whose right arm was injured, was told by Dr Larisa Mamitova that he needed to see a doctor as soon as the crisis ended, as he was in danger of developing gangrene. Khodov then asked specifically what type of doctor he should go see, indi-

cating that in his case the question of survival was still open-ended.⁸⁵ During the same conversation, Khodov also changed his behaviour to become very unfriendly once Mamitova told him that she had worked in the village of Elkhotoovo. It wasn't known to her at the time but Elkhotoovo was Khodov's home village, where his mother still lived and worked, coincidentally also in the medical field.⁸⁶ The change of behaviour toward Mamitova could therefore be interpreted as a signal of fear of being identified, something unlikely to bother a terrorist committed to certain death.⁸⁷ In short, while there is no question that members of Polkovnik's unit were *prepared* to die during the Beslan operation, it is questionable whether their death was truly designed as the operation's only *preferred outcome*. The key challenge of the negotiation process was to come up with a solution that would be more attractive to the terrorists than their own demise. For this reason, the terrorists' declared preparedness to die might have made negotiations extremely difficult, but certainly did not exclude the possibility of a non-violent resolution altogether.

Indicators of De-escalation

Besides the above-stated indicators of high volatility, signs of de-escalation⁸⁸ were also present as the incident progressed.

One positive indicator, perhaps, was the fact that the attackers let several deadlines pass, and that they failed to follow through with some of their threats. Experience shows that once a deadline is breached, it is easier to break through future deadlines and to prolong the incident.⁸⁹ And while the prolonga-

⁸⁴ 'Beslan Hostage-Takers Did Not Want to Die – Former Ingush President Ruslan Aushev', *MosNews*, 28 September 2004.

⁸⁵ Interview with Larisa Mamitova, Beslan, November 2005.

⁸⁶ Mamitova did in fact know Khodov's mother, but never met her son before.

⁸⁷ Similarly, when on the second day, Larisa Kudzyeva approached Khodov with a request to wash her blood soaked skirt, he replied, 'You'll wash it at home'.

⁸⁸ Strentz (1991), *Op cit*.

⁸⁹ McMains (2001), *Op cit*.

tion of the incident by itself does not automatically guarantee a peaceful resolution, it does strengthen the chances for such an outcome. At the very least, it provides the tactical unit with more time to study the behavioural patterns of the perpetrators and to prepare for an assault. In that sense the Beslan terrorists' failure to follow up on some of their threats with action constituted a positive development.

From the outset of the crisis, the terrorists were concerned about the authorities turning off the lights or shutting off communications, so they threatened to kill twenty hostages if their cell-phones were turned off, if it was on but one answered their call, or if lights were shut off. Late in the first day, the cell phone number Polkovnik passed to outside for communications was in fact turned off, but no executions followed. On the second night of the crisis, lights were shut off during a thunder storm but no hostages were killed.

Another element of the crisis that gave some cause for optimism was the release of the nursing mothers with their babies following Aushev's intervention on the second day. This move demonstrated the willingness of the terrorists to make agreements and to release hostages. Interestingly, it was comparatively easy for Aushev to convince the terrorists to release the nursing mothers. He simply agreed to convey the terrorists' demands to Putin, and asked for the children to be released.⁹⁰ This suggests that the principle of *quid pro quo* was clearly understood by the terrorists. In addition, it also appears that they were prepared to release more people if the negotiations made some headway. According to hostages, on the first day the terrorists compiled a list of all children under the legal school age, presumably to provide quick reference to the hostages if they were

to be released in future deals. And since a precedent for the release of a small number of hostages had already been set, it could have been used to pave the road for further small agreements at the end of which other small groups of hostages would be freed. Moreover, the terrorists had multiple demands, which presented an opportunity to divide the discussion in the negotiation into smaller elements and make relatively minor procedural agreements to facilitate this process.

Negotiations: Missed Opportunities

Throughout the Beslan crisis, the Federal authorities kept denying the existence of any demands made by the hostage-takers, implying that there was nothing more that could have been done to save the lives of the hostages but to storm the location. According to the Head of the Investigative Group of North Caucasus Directorate of the Russian Prosecutor-General's office, 'proof exists that the terrorists who seized the school in Beslan did not intend to negotiate with anybody.'⁹¹ His implication was, how could one negotiate with a group of suicidal drug addicts that has no demands?

Such distortions are easily dismissed. The terrorists did come to Beslan to achieve specific political objectives. They presented a clear set of demands. Throughout the crisis, the terrorists were eager to speak to the authorities. But according to hostages, no one would talk to them.⁹² At every moment, they waited for someone to get in touch with them, telling the hostages: 'Be quiet, we can't hear the cell phone. If they call, maybe things will get better for you.'⁹³ Some of the terrorists also told the hostages: 'We will not kill anyone, we have a plan. If it is fulfilled you will go home.'

⁹⁰ Interview with Ruslan Aushev, Moscow, July 2005.

⁹¹ RIA: Russian Official Reveals Evidence Uncovered By Beslan Investigation, 4 February 2005.

⁹² 'Kulayev Trial provides New beslan Details', *Chechnya Weekly*, Volume 6, Issue 23, 16 June 2005.

⁹³ Madina Khuzmieva testimony in court, The Kulayev Trial, 19 July 2005.

To be sure, the terrorists also kept repeating that they came to Beslan to die, that they would blow up the school, that the hostages are 'not needed by anyone', that 'no one will leave alive', and that the hostages would be 'killed by their own'. But more importantly, the attackers put forward a clear set of conditions and demands with the intent of securing a concise set of political concessions. They also specifically stated what they were willing to offer in exchange. Their stated demands were by themselves, of course, difficult to achieve, both logistically and politically. But the fact that their proposal included multiple demands and specific conditions provided much room for discussions without necessarily giving in to the main demand.

On the key demand to end the war in Chechnya, the main mistake was the authorities' misplaced focus on the *substantive* nature of the demand and on the political unacceptability of fulfilling it. The situation was viewed as a zero sum game, leading many to mistakenly conclude that there was no possibility of a negotiated resolution. The main focus should have been placed not on the instrumental, but rather on the *expressive* nature of that demand, and to ask the question 'why?' – 'Why do you demand the end of war in Chechnya?', 'Why should Putin resign?' These are obvious questions that have obvious answers, but in crisis negotiations such questions need to be asked, as they provide the terrorists an opportunity to clearly state their grievances. This, in turn, gives the negotiator an opportunity to engage the spokesperson on the other side on a more personal level by asking about his or her *personal* experience with the alleged injustices and abuse. In doing so, an opportunity opens for the negotiator to express empathy. In ideological hostage situations, it is always very difficult to move the discussion away from ideology toward a more personal level, and this approach provides one of the

possible ways. Forming personal rapport between the negotiators on both sides is a critical principle which the crisis negotiation practice is based upon. Another reason that asking the question 'why?' is important, is the fact that answers can provide an insight into the hostage-taker's underlying interests. If these interests are understood, new options that would address the terrorist's root motivations and concerns, but would stop short of their original demands, can be introduced. Through this process the hostage-takers' expectations can be changed. Also, shaping the militants' perception of having achieved some success, gives them a stake in the outcome, and can prevent them from taking radical steps that would waste everything that had already been accomplished. This is why it is important to focus at the outset on the demands that are easier to fulfill. Specifically, the demand about the release of the hostage-taker's imprisoned comrades from the Nazran raid provided hope, as this was something that could feasibly have been discussed. According to Aslakhonov, trading these prisoners for child hostages was acceptable to President Putin as well.⁹⁴

Beslan was, for all the reasons documented above, an extremely challenging situation. But it was not 'immune' to a negotiated settlement, as Moscow has so robustly asserted. For starters, that the terrorists' demands were not divided into smaller, more manageable elements violated a cardinal principle of negotiation. Take, for example, the demand of the President to issue an edict that would end the war in Chechnya. The negotiators should have focused on asking about the language of the text. Would the Russian word 'Chechnya' or the Chechen separatist term, 'Ichkeria' be used? What else was to be included? Simply a commitment to a pull-out of troops, or apologies for the past? Does the pull-out of troops mean just the army or all *Federal* troops? Which district

⁹⁴ 'Basaev Claims Beslan Attacks', RFE/RL, 17 September 2004.

should be 'freed' first? Is there an understanding of the logistical issues involved in such a massive operation? What sort of guarantees are the terrorists prepared to propose, to prove that they will keep their promise and release the hostages once the pull-out is completed? What gestures of good faith were they ready to offer? Perhaps providing water to the children? Or even releasing children under seven years of age, the list of which had already been compiled? This is just an example of some of the issues that could have been raised and discussed in order to engage the terrorists.

On day two, it was clear that the top priority of the negotiations had to be the improvement of the conditions inside the school to enhance the survivability of hostages. Levels of dehydration among the hostages were reaching dangerous levels, indeed some children had already started dying. The authorities should have worked step-by-step to offer concessions to facilitate, at a minimum, the provision of water, and then work toward the prolongation of the incident in an attempt to wear out the hostage-takers. The terrorists stopped giving water to the hostages on the second day, after the officials repeated their claim that there were only 354 people held in the gym. It seems possible, if not probable, that publicly admitting the actual number of hostages could have been 'exchanged' for water for the hostages.

Another opportunity was presented by the demand for the four negotiators specified by the terrorists to come to Beslan. Individually, they were unacceptable – the terrorists wanted to face Dzosokhov, Zaizikov, Aslakhonov and Roshal all at the same time. According to the testimony of the sole surviving terrorist, Polkovnik offered to release 150 people for each negotiator. When asked whether these men would be executed, Polkovnik made a guarantee for their safety.⁹⁵ Importantly, Polkovnik had pre-

viously made the same guarantee for Aushev and had kept his word. The situation of the other four men was less predictable, to be sure. Basayev had previously issued a *fatwa* calling for Zaizikov's execution and criticized and condemned Roshal for the statements he made after Dubrovka. Dzosokhov and Aslakhonov were obvious targets by their title alone. All of these facts suggest that they would likely have been killed if they entered the school. Nevertheless, just summoning all of them to Beslan, and showing their presence near the siege site on television would put more pressure on the terrorists to reciprocate in some way. It could have also facilitated the discussion about possible confidence building measures by both sides. These attempts might not have led to anything, but still could have kept the communications going.

Overall, the biggest mistake in Beslan was the failure of the authorities to communicate with the terrorists. True, the political reality cannot be overlooked. President Putin had won his first presidency largely because of his tough stance on Chechnya; he could scarcely afford being seen to negotiate with terrorists. Allowing Maskhadov to enter the negotiations, and perhaps even succeed, would also have been a huge political and personal blow to Putin. Moreover, the Kremlin's fear that giving in to the terrorists' demands would only encourage further acts of terrorism is also understandable. Nevertheless, an unpublicized, small scale, behind-the-scenes negotiation effort could have worked to contribute toward saving the lives of hostages while at the same time limiting the negative impact associated with the public perception of a terrorist victory.

In the end, it would be difficult to argue that Beslan could have been resolved without the loss of life. Doubtless the chances of negotiating a complete surrender or a free passage for the terrorists were very slight, especially given the Russian Government's

⁹⁵ Interview with Regina Revazova, Beslan, June 2005.

track record of deceiving militants with false promises of safety in similar situations in the past. Yet even if the incident was bound to end in bloodshed, maximum effort should have been made to get as many hostages out of the school as possible via the negotiation process before resorting to a violent solution. Not only did the Federal authorities fail in this task, they essentially failed to even try. Even more disturbingly, the official reactions and statements on television, such as the deliberate and clearly false downplaying of the number of hostages inside, exacerbated

the crisis. As in past hostage crises in Russia, the Kremlin seems to have had only one goal in mind – to discredit the separatist leadership and to teach Basayev a lesson. In some quarters, Putin's 'courage' was applauded: the 'no negotiations with terrorists' policy was upheld and the 'national interest' was placed ahead of the fate of individual hostages, however painful that proved on this occasion. Yet to concur with such sentiments is to tacitly accept the *worst* possible lesson of Beslan: it is impossible to negotiate with the 'new terrorists'.

Chapter 4: Learning from Failure

Intelligence Failure

As with any spectacular terrorist attack, one of the central questions frequently asked by the public concerns the issue of early intelligence indicators that could have provided the critical insight needed to stop the attack occurring in the first place. In the case of Beslan, up until several months before the incident, a number of signs indicated a heightened level of terrorist activity in the region, as well as, more specifically, an imminent attack.

Firstly, Ossetia itself has been the site of several recent attacks, most of which had specific links to the attackers later found in Beslan. On 5 June 2003, a woman dressed in a white overcoat killed eighteen people when she detonated her explosive belt while trying to board a bus carrying Russian airmen to their base in Mozdok. Two months later, that same base became the target of another attack, when two suicide bombers drove an explosive-laden truck into the 58th Army military hospital, killing fifty people and injuring many others.⁹⁶ At this time, the authorities in Moscow were already in possession of a suspected suicide bomber, Zarema Muzhakhoyeva. According to Muzhakhoyeva's interrogation reports, she was supposed to be the original bomber during the first Mozdok attack, but fell ill and was unable to participate. She was then sent to Moscow with two other women and on 5 July 2003, she witnessed both their deaths during the twin suicide bombings at a rock

concert in Moscow's Tushino Airfield, where eighteen people were killed. Five days later, she herself was arrested and accused of attempting to commit a suicide attack near the Mon-Café restaurant in the heart of Moscow. A police officer died while trying to defuse the device.

Muzhakhoyeva's interrogation following her arrest led to the apprehension of Rustam Ganiev, who was accused of recruiting and training suicide bombers for Basayev's RAS, and whose two sisters had died in the attack on the Dubrovka Theatre in Moscow in October 2002. Ganiev had very close links to a number of the Beslan terrorists. For instance, the one person who was arrested along with Ganiev was Mayrbek Shaybekhanov (who would, however, under mysterious circumstances later be freed).⁹⁷ In September 2004, Shaybekhanov was one of the terrorists holding 1,200 people hostage in the Beslan school, along with his wife, who was allegedly one of the suicide bombers.⁹⁸ Another Beslan terrorist with close links to Muzhakhoyeva and Ganiev was Khanpashi Kulayev, who coincidentally was also supposed to be in prison at the time of the Beslan attack.⁹⁹ According to Muzhakhoyeva's testimony, she and Khanpashi not only belonged to the same division, but also 'practically lived together' although they were never officially married.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, one of the Beslan leaders – Vladimir Khodov – was not unknown to authorities, having previously been wanted

⁹⁶ Murphy (2005), *Op cit.*, p. 231.

⁹⁷ 'School hostage-takers released from prison', *The Russia Journal*, 7 September 2004.

⁹⁸ Shvarev Aleksander, 'Man With a Gun From Engenoy', *Moscow Vremya Novostey*, 16 September 2004.

⁹⁹ Yekaterina Blinova and Anton Trofimov, 'Beslan Hostage-takers May Have Included Arrested Terrorist, Basayev Link Likely', *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 8 September 2004.

¹⁰⁰ Zaur Farniev, 'Who Should We Kill Now, Zarema?' *Kommersant*, 24 December 2005.

on charges of rape, and was also publicly sought for the 2 February 2004 city centre bombing of Vladikavkaz, in which three police cadets died.¹⁰¹ Although a wanted man, Khodov freely moved around, and even visited his home village of Elkhoto in Ossetia several times.

In fact, this tangled web of relationships between the arrested contacts in Moscow and the Caucasus could have provided the necessary information for the identification of the key Beslan suspects beforehand. Even if this did not happen, the fact that at least two of the Beslan terrorists were supposed to be in jail at the time of the attack, and that another one moved around freely in his home village despite being a wanted man, is alarming. In addition, more indications of heightened terrorist violence were visible in neighbouring Ingushetia, making the presence of the Beslan attackers felt even more acutely. On 15 September 2003, a suicide bomber detonated a 600-pound truck bomb sixteen feet short of the newly constructed FSB building in Magas, killing three people.¹⁰² One of the key organizers of the attack was Ruslan Khuchbarov (Polkovnik) – the same man whom the authorities accused of training suicide bombers for the operations in Dubrovka and Mozdok, and who would later lead the Beslan commando team.¹⁰³ Polkovnik was also one of the leading figures in the 21 June 2004 attack on the now former Ingushetian capital of Nazran,¹⁰⁴ in which 200 attackers wearing local police uniforms set up roadblocks intercepting and killing real policemen and interior troops who raced

to reinforce their colleagues. The attack followed Basayev's statement, in which he announced that RAS was ready to launch a series of special operations that would be 'very painful for the Putin regime and [would] take [Russia] by surprise'.¹⁰⁵ Nearly 100 people died, including several Ministers, before the fighters withdrew and disappeared. Besides Polkovnik, at least six other Beslan attackers participated in this attack. In addition, thirty-one of the attackers arrested during the Nazran raid later became subjects in the Beslan negotiations. Finally, it has now been reliably established that among the weapons found in the possession of the terrorists in Beslan, seven Kalashnikov assault rifles and three pistols had been stolen during the attack on Ingushetia. During the month of July, a number of additional incidents relating to the Nazran raid and Beslan took place in Ingushetia, including the death of both the Malgobek Deputy Chief of Police and the Malgobek Deputy Head of the Crime Unit, who were killed in a shoot-out with suspected terrorists on the city's outskirts; the discovery of a large stockpile of weapons from Nazran in the woods near Sagopshi; and two shoot-outs near the same village, in which one militant was killed and another escaped.¹⁰⁶ Little did anyone know that in the forest on the hill overlooking Sagopshi and Psedakh was a training camp, where the Beslan terrorists were preparing for the operation; and that the man who escaped the shoot-out was Musa Tsechoev, whose body would later be found among the thirty-one Beslan terrorists

¹⁰¹ 'Professional Terrorists', *Moscow Vremya Novostey*, 17 September 2004.

¹⁰² Murphy (2005), *Op cit.*, p. 232.

¹⁰³ 'Russian Law Enforcement Identifies Beslan Ringleader as Chechen Ruslan, "The Colonel" Khuchbarov', *Vremya Novostey*, FBIS ID#: CEP20040910000096.

¹⁰⁴ RFE/RL Fact Box: Major terrorist Incidents tied to Russian-Chechen War. Available at: <<http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2004/09/d981dd2d-8b08-41ff-a2e2-ada25338093c.html>>.

¹⁰⁵ 'Basayev Says "Special Operations" Prepared for "Occupying Forces"', *Kavkaz-Tsentr News Agency*, FBIS ID#: CEP20040617000031.

¹⁰⁶ Buse, Fichtner, Kaiser, Klusmann, Mayr, and Neef, *Op cit.*

killed.¹⁰⁷ The terrorists from the camp were allegedly free to roam about in their home villages, though this is not altogether surprising given the small village of Psedakh has only one official policeman, who is on duty only during the hours of daylight. (In reality, however, none of the Psedakh residents consulted by the author have ever seen him.)¹⁰⁸

All of these activities in the region should have had the local authorities on high alert. The arrest of a large number of terrorists, who had intimate connections with the Beslan attackers, should have provided the missing pieces of the puzzle. To be fair, it is true that the heightened level of violent activity in the region did not go completely unnoticed. Just twelve days before the Beslan attack, the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs allegedly sent a telegram to all regional police commanders warning of a possible 'Budyonnovsk-style operation' in Northern Ossetia. This information apparently became even more specific several days later. One Beslan resident, Baliko Margiev, asked a traffic policeman just four days before the attack why his car was being so carefully inspected. To this he was told, 'a group of militants have penetrated Beslan'.¹⁰⁹ In retrospect, this intelligence was accurate, as one of the terrorists was spotted by two Beslan residents in the local marketplace a week before the attack. Similarly, Beslan residents reported several unknown men sitting on boxes in the courtyard of the school in the

week leading up to the incident.¹¹⁰ And finally, according to a report given to Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliev at 0500 on 1 September 2004, police in the Chechen town of Shali detained someone named Arsamikov, who told them that there was a plot to seize schools in Beslan the very same day.¹¹¹ Considering there are only four schools in Beslan, and that School Number One was by far the biggest and most prominent, it is noteworthy, to say the least, that even after receiving this intelligence, the school was guarded by just one unarmed female police officer, who did not even have a mobile phone.¹¹² Even more disturbingly, despite elevated threat levels, the local traffic police, who guard major intersections near the school every day were not present. According to officials, the two officers who were supposed to serve as armed security at the school that day had been re-assigned to the Caucasus Highway, allegedly to provide extra protection for a high-ranking official who was supposed to pass through. At the time of writing, there was no available information on who that official was supposed to be.¹¹³

With all of these early warning signs, concrete intelligence, elevated risk levels and thereby associated increased security measures, how is it possible that a large group of armed militants was able to travel all the way to Beslan? There are still considerable doubts and many conspiracy theories circulating in

¹⁰⁷ In an informal chat, several policemen who were also Sagopshi residents denied the existence of the camp, as well as the discovery of the weapons and shoot-out with Tsechoyev. But the body language and inconsistency in their story have lead the author to conclude that they were lying. This is not surprising as some of the Beslan terrorists were their childhood friends and fellow policemen.

¹⁰⁸ Conversations with residents of Psedakh, November 2004.

¹⁰⁹ 'Newspaper Provides Fresh Beslan Details', Jamestown Foundation, *Chechnya Weekly*, Volume 6, Issue 21, 1 June 2005.

¹¹⁰ 'Kulayev Trial: The Missing Slavic Snipers', Jamestown Foundation, *Chechnya Weekly*, Volume 6, Issue 30, 3 August 2005.

¹¹¹ 'Newspaper Provides Fresh Beslan Details', *Op cit*.

¹¹² Interview with Fatima Dudiyeva, the sole police officer present at the school during the takeover, who later became a hostage.

¹¹³ John B. Dunlop, 'Beslan: Russia's 9/11?', The American Committee for Peace in Chechnya and The Jamestown Foundation, October 2005.

Beslan because of statements made by the terrorists during the crisis. For instance, Khodov told Larisa Mamitova: 'Doctor, you will not believe it if you knew how we ended up here. Just wait till I tell you the story'.¹¹⁴ Khodov also mocked the authorities, boasting out loud to a number of hostages: 'Nobody cares about you. Your police sold you out for \$20,000'. According to hostages, Ali also claimed that getting to Beslan did not cause any problems whatsoever, and that at every [police] post, they paid money and passed through.¹¹⁵ It seems that the hostage-takers were eager to capitalize on the doubts for propaganda reasons, as documented by the recorded message that they left behind in the school. It said:

There is a small puddle. There's nothing here – no lakes, no rivers, no sources of water at all. Just trees, leaves, animals and that puddle. One question really interests me: Where do the frogs come from?

This message apparently refers to the question of how the terrorists (frogs) made it to Beslan (puddle). Police corruption is certainly a feasible explanation. Trying to capitalize on the seeds of doubt in order to discredit the Russian leadership, Basayev offered an even more alarming version.¹¹⁶ He described Khodov as a double agent, whose actions were facilitated directly by the FSB in order to get to him personally. Given Khodov's alleged confession of this fact, Basayev claimed to have tricked the Russians into thinking that he would attack in Vladikavkaz, drawing attention away from

Beslan. This version is supported by the fact that Khodov was immediately released after his initial arrest, and was able to move around freely in Ossetia. Further, the fact that regular police posts were removed and police officers who were supposed to be guarding the school were called off for 'more pressing duties' lends additional credibility to Basayev's claims. At the same time, however, Basayev is clearly attempting to capitalize on the doubt and confusion surrounding Beslan stemming from the Government's inability to explain certain parts of the story. That Basayev offered his conspiratorial version long after Beslan suggests that this is a well-calculated political move rather than a reflection of reality. One of Basayev's principal goals has always been to make the Russian Government appear incompetent and evil, and by doing so undermine its authority in the eyes of its own citizens. The only police officer who apparently stood up to the terrorists on their way to Beslan by trying to halt their progress was not commended for his action – indeed, the fact that he was not killed was enough for the police to accuse him of being an accomplice to the terrorists, and so he was, reportedly, tortured during an interrogation¹¹⁷ – raises myriad questions about Moscow's motivations during the crisis.

Operational Management

Even more pressing and troubling than the intelligence failure are the events surrounding the storming of the school, and the con-

¹¹⁴ Interview with Larisa Mamitova, Beslan, November 2005.

¹¹⁵ 'Kulayev Trial: The Missing Slavic Snipers', *Op cit.*

¹¹⁶ Shamil Basayev, 'We have got much to tell about Beslan...' open letter of the Chechen journalist Ahmad Ichkeriiskiy, Kavkaz Center, 1 September 2005.

¹¹⁷ When Major Sultan Gurashev, an Ingush police officer that encountered and single-handedly tried to stop the suspicious vehicles near the village of Khurikau, he was disarmed and tied up in one of the cars. The terrorists left him there as they stormed the school. After Gurashev's interrogation by the authorities, he was released with lacerations on his forehead and crushed testicles, fired from his job, and his village was surrounded by strict checkpoints that made it difficult to go to markets or hospitals. Khurikau residents' requests to restore gas and electricity in the village have been consistently ignored, prompting accusations of collective punishment. (Interview with Gurashev's brother-in-law, Ali Khurikau, November 2005).

tradictory statements by various officials in relation to the negotiation efforts. This section will focus on some of the discrepancies and mistakes associated with operational management.

Management Failures

From the beginning, the response management of the Beslan siege was highly disorganized. The incident was handled by at least six different command centres with little co-operation among them. According to Ossetian President Alexander Dzasokhov, 'all important decisions taken between 1–3 September were under the direct control of FSB Deputy Directors Pronichev and Anisimov or originated from them'.¹¹⁸ People from the local command centre were not consulted by their Federal counterparts; two well-built, well-armed men prevented anyone, including the local officials, from entering the Federal command centre.¹¹⁹ According to *Novaya Gazeta*, witnesses confirm that just hours after Russian commandos began to storm the school, 'the group of FSB employees quickly packed up their equipment and left the [Beslan city] administration building in an unknown direction'.¹²⁰

The chaotic nature of the set-up was underlined by the number of agencies that were present at the site, including the elite Alfa and Vypel units, Military Intelligence troops (TRU), Interior Army (BB), Local FSB division, Center of Special Purpose (USNRSB), local police, Army Secret Police (GROU), Special Purpose Detachment of Militsiya (OMON), Rapid Deployment

Special Troops (SOBR), and regular Russian Army (technical support: tanks, transporters, etc.).¹²¹ All of these had their own chain of command, and mutual communication among them was limited. Two principal perimeters existed, with the external perimeter set up by the 58th Army about three hours into the attack. The Army was later joined by some local policemen who took up positions on their own initiative without any specific orders or instructions. In the inner perimeter, there were a number of different operational teams and local civilians with guns. This presented a major problem, as this perimeter was too close to the school, and there were frequent exchanges of sniper fire with the terrorists. On the second day, the terrorists even fired a rocket propelled grenade (RPG) at a car to force the armed men outside to keep their distance. In addition, the gunmen reportedly tried to provoke divisions between the Federal and Ossetian officials in the Operational Headquarters by trying to convince the locals that they should form a human shield around the school to prevent storming.¹²² The armed locals took this idea even further. With vivid images of the 129 dead hostages in the Moscow theatre crisis in mind, they threatened to shoot the Federal troops themselves if they started storming the school. Yet throughout the incident, these local volunteers were never disarmed and neutralized. This added a high level of instability to the already difficult situation. Further, the double perimeter was simply not made secure enough, despite the large number of troops present. For instance, Russian journalist Madina Shavlokhova – who arrived several hours into the crises –

¹¹⁸ 'Documents Suggest that the Feds Were in Charge During Beslan', Jamestown Foundation, *Chechnya Weekly*, Volume 6, Issue 15, 20 April 2005.

¹¹⁹ Dzasokhov was the only local allowed to enter the Federal Command Center, but when he entered the room everyone went quiet and just stared at him. He walked in and said, 'Am I disturbing you?' and they would be polite, but they wouldn't involve him in any major decision-making. (Interview with Stanislav Kesaev, Vladikavkaz, November 2005).

¹²⁰ 'Documents Suggest that the Feds Were in Charge During Beslan', *Op cit.*

¹²¹ Interview with Andrei Soldatov, Moscow, July 2005.

¹²² Plater-Zyberk, *Op cit.*

accidentally found herself right in the school's courtyard without running into a single police or Army barrier.¹²³

In short, the entire set-up of the operation was highly chaotic. There was no consensus on who was in charge, too many bodies were without sufficient communication systems and co-ordination, and armed civilians were not controlled in any way. The operational scene was a disaster waiting to happen. Thus, it is hardly surprising that the origin of the explosion that triggered the storming has been the subject of such intense speculation. No less than fourteen different versions of what allegedly caused the initial explosion have been uncovered thus far. Perhaps four of them are plausible, but in each case there are many other pieces of evidence that do not seem to fit. The two versions with the highest level of plausibility include an accidental detonation of the first bomb and the 'sniper theory'. The former is essentially the official version, which claims that one of the bombs, attached to a basketball hoop by adhesive tape, detonated accidentally after it slipped off the hoop. The scorching temperatures in the gym are thought to have melted the glue holding it in place. The second explosion, which occurred twenty-two seconds later, was then allegedly triggered deliberately by the terrorists, believing they were being stormed. However, this version is not wholly viable for several reasons. First, it was not the bomb in the hoop that exploded first, rather it was the one hanging on a string connecting the two hoops. Second, according to hostages, the bomb exploded in the air, implying it was triggered by something other than impact with the floor. Third, according to Andrei Gagloyev, the Commander of the

Engineering Troops of the 58th Army, 'such explosive devices cannot be triggered by hitting the floor'.¹²⁴ Fourth, the explosion happened at the very same moment a lorry pulled up to collect the bodies of the twenty-one men killed earlier indicating a likely connection between these two events.

The Sniper Theory received much publicity after Kulayev's testimony. He claimed the detonation occurred as a result of a sniper killing the terrorist whose foot rested on the detonation pedal to prevent the electrical circuit from closing. But in Beslan, it was Fatima Dudiyeva's account, the local policewoman who later became a hostage, which first mentioned the Sniper Theory. Moments before detonation, she was sitting next to the window stretching her back and reaching her arms up. At that moment she 'heard a sound like a stone being thrown through the window. And then there was pain'. She looked at her right hand and it was bleeding out of a hole in her palm.¹²⁵ Shortly thereafter, there was an explosion. Ala Ramonova, another hostage, confirms this: 'Right before the first explosion, something flew into the gym with a whistling sound, and the terrorist standing on the switch clutched his side and fell over.'¹²⁶ The Federal Commission in Moscow was extremely quick to discredit this story. The Head of the Commission, Alexander Torshin explained that the gym windows were coated with a special plastic called 'Lexan', which makes them opaque. Consequently, it would have been impossible for a sniper to see anything going on inside. 'Besides,' said Torshin, 'this terrorist [with the foot on the switch] was standing in a 'dead-zone', meaning he could not have been in the line of fire. Terrorists are not idiots.'¹²⁷ However, even if Lexan was

¹²³ Interview with Madina Shavlokhova, Beslan, July 2005.

¹²⁴ Controversial evidence in Kulayev case, Caucasian Knot, 17 January 2006.

¹²⁵ Interview with Fatima Dudiyeva, Beslan, November 2005.

¹²⁶ Interview with Ala Ramonova, Beslan, July 2005.

¹²⁷ Снайперам мешало специальное остекление в бесланской школе, 12 August 2005
<<http://lenta.ru/news/2005/08/12/sniper/>>.

used to coat the glass, as early as day one the terrorists purposely broke top sections of each window for fear the authorities would use gas, as in the case of Dubrovka, thus effectively removing the supposed obstacle of visibility. In addition, from the upper floors and the roof of one of the two five-storey apartment buildings near the school, where snipers were positioned, it is not only possible to see inside the gym through the top parts of the windows, but the terrorist can be targetted in a clear line of fire. In addition, the fact that the blast took place as the lorry pulled up to collect the bodies might suggest a level of co-ordination, as the distraction provided a good opportunity to strike.

Another point of acute controversy relates to the sequence of events after the initial storming of the school. From the outset of the crisis, FSB First Deputy Director Vladimir Pronichev spoke categorically against any military scenario, claiming that as a matter of principle, the FSB did not develop any plans to attack the school.¹²⁸ This was, of course, nonsense. The necessity of having a rescue operation plan in place as an option of last resort should the hostage-takers start killing hostages is a fundamental component of any response to a hostage situation.

According to witnesses, tanks and armoured vehicles pulled up to the school on the evening of day two.¹²⁹ These were later used not only as a cover for the advancing Spetsnaz troops, but were also used to fire tank shells at the school during the later stages of the rescue operation. According to a testimony given by Sergeant Godovalov, the Commander of one of the T-72 tanks in

question, the tank fired on the school on the orders of an Alpha officer, part of the elite anti-terrorist unit. According to the testimony, the tank 'fired four times at a spot where one of the terrorists was believed to be located, and was then moved to another area, where, again on the Alpha officer's orders, it fired three 'anti-personnel rounds' at three outermost windows on the school's second floor.'¹³⁰ Whether the tank fire took place while hostages were still at the gym is a point of much contention. For instance, Andrei Gagloyev, Commander of the Engineering Troops of the 58th Army, testified at the Kulayev trial that the tanks fired when the gym no longer contained any hostages.¹³¹ However, First Deputy Chairman of the Parliament of North Ossetia, Izrail Totoonti, disagrees. He claims that he first heard the tanks fire at about 1400: 'That was before we began bringing hostages out of the school.'¹³² Totoonti's version is in concert with the testimonies of hostages, and therefore this issue remains a source of intense anger amongst Beslan residents, who lost family members or friends in the siege.

Tanks were not the only unsuitable equipment used during this hostage rescue operation. Even more controversial was the use of Shmel flamethrowers. The Beslan Mothers Committee claim that in 218 of the 331 fatalities, burns were established as the cause of death.¹³³ The issue of Shmels first arose after Beslan residents found several launchers and passed them over for investigation. Originally, the authorities denied using these weapons, claiming that they belonged to the terrorists. However, two of the used

¹²⁸ Lawrence Uzzell, 'Reporter Puts Forward Another Version of Events,' Jamestown Foundation, *Chechnya Weekly*, Volume 5, Issue 35, 15 September 2004.

¹²⁹ Elena Milashina, 'Eyewitnesses: "The roof caught fire when they began shooting shells at it"' *Novaya Gazeta*, 7 October 2004.

¹³⁰ 'Newspaper Provides Fresh Beslan Details,' Jamestown Foundation, *Chechnya Weekly* Volume 6, Issue 21, 1 June 2005.

¹³¹ Controversial evidence in Kulayev case, *Caucasian Knot*, 17 January 2006.

¹³² Interview with Israil Totoonti, Beslan, November 2005.

¹³³ Interview with the head of the Beslan Mothers' Committee, Susanna Duadyieva and local journalist and witness Murag Kaboev, Beslan, July 2005.

launchers were found on the roof of an adjacent building, suggesting they were used to fire upon the school. This is consistent with hostage testimonies, which claim that even after the initial explosions, there was only a small fire inside the gym. At the same time, melting plastic was dripping on them from the ceiling, long before any fire was visible from the inside. Eventually, an aide to the Vladikavkaz garrison military prosecutor, identified as Major Justice Eminov, confirmed that Shmel flamethrowers were used. He stated that they may have ‘possibly killed hostages or caused them bodily harm of varying degrees of severity.’¹³⁴ It did not help that the fire trucks arriving at the scene ran out of water almost immediately.

Notwithstanding the myriad complexities and obstacles encountered by the rescuers, the rescue operation was, overall, a huge blunder. Perhaps most alarming was the use of tanks and flamethrowers to fire at the school while it still contained hostages, which suggests that the lives of hostages were, once again, considered secondary to the punishment and elimination of the terrorists. What’s more, the heavy-handedness of the Russian authorities actually played into Basayev’s strategy. After Beslan, Basayev stated:

*We came there not to kill people but to stop the war, and if it works out that way, to force the Russian leadership to kill its own civilians, if only through this to force the lying and vain world to understand what is really going on, to lay bare our wound and pain, because people don’t see what is happening in Chechnya. They see it only when huge actions like this one occur on the territory of Russia itself.*¹³⁵

Media Management

Since media coverage can directly influence the outcome of a hostage crisis, media management is an absolutely crucial part of the response strategy. First, the media picture

shapes perceptions among the general population, which in turn can affect how decision-makers assess the urgency of the situation and their appropriate course of action. Second, media coverage also influences the perceptions of the hostage-takers, as it serves as one of the main sources of information for the people on the inside. In moments when the negotiations hit a roadblock, televised coverage of public statements can be used to communicate messages to the hostage-takers indirectly. This is especially true of hostage crises in Russia, where the hostage-takers keenly follow the television and radio reports in order to gain knowledge about what was going on in the outside world. And third, media coverage has always been one of the most important tools in resolving hostage crises, especially ones motivated by religious or ideological grievances. In such cases, the hostage-takers are typically interested in conveying their point of view to the highest number of viewers possible. In such a setting, the access to media has historically been used as a valuable bargaining chip to obtain the release of hostages or some other concessions on behalf of the hostage-takers.

The media’s impact on the outcome can also be a very negative one. In the past, a number of hostage crises have been complicated by irresponsible reporting, such as the airing of live footage of rescue teams moving into position or the revealing of hostages identities to those on the inside, leading to their execution. As a result, media management needs to be handled with utmost care in any hostage situation. This requires a mutual understanding of media and Government interests.

From this perspective, too, Beslan was a colossal failure. The information that was released to the media was manipulated so crudely that everyone in Beslan, including

¹³⁴ ‘Newspaper Provides Fresh Beslan Details,’ *Op cit.*

¹³⁵ Basayev Interview for Channel 4 News, 4 February 2005.

the terrorists, knew that this could not have been unintentional. On day one, Lev Dzugayev,¹³⁶ the North Ossetian President spokesman, originally identified the number of hostages inside the school as 120. But he later corrected himself by raising the figure to 354. This was School Number One, the largest school in Beslan, accommodating nearly 1,000 students. Moreover, it was 1 September, a day when many parents and family members accompany the younger children to school for a special celebration known as the Day of Knowledge. In addition, the fact that the number of hostages was over 1,200 was conveyed by the terrorists in telephone conversations with officials, and to Ruslan Aushev, who personally visited the gym. Aushev was even handed a videotape, which featured the scenes from the gym, where it was obvious that there were several hundred hostages present. The authorities immediately, and stubbornly, claimed the tape was blank, even when it was later shown on the NTV channel. Mamitova, the doctor, who had on two occasions brought out the terrorist demands on a piece of paper, also conveyed the real number of hostages on both occasions. In short, it is beyond reasonable doubt that the actual number of hostages in the gym was known to every person in the region, as demonstrated by the fact that 1,045 hospital beds in four Beslan and Vladikavkaz hospitals were being freed in preparation for the worst. And yet, the authorities continued to insist that the number of hostages was 354. This approach not only angered the local residents and undermined public confidence in Government statements, it was also directly responsible for escalating the tensions during the crisis.

The terrorists knew immediately that the Government was purposefully downplaying the number of hostages, and interpreted this move as public relations preparations for the aftermath of an inevitable rescue operation. Immediately after the 354 figure was announced, the terrorists started to run around the gym screaming: 'They say that there are 354 of you. Nobody needs you. Maybe we will just reduce you to that number!' In addition, when this number was consistently repeated even on day two, the terrorists stopped giving the children water. Overall, the Government's insistence on the unrealistically low number of hostages made an already bad situation much worse.

The next issue that arose with regards to the media management of the Beslan siege involved some highly disturbing allegations of Government restrictions on media coverage unfavourable to the Russian state. For instance, immediately after the crisis, officials in Mineralnye Vody detained the Moscow Bureau Chief of the satellite television channel, *Al-Arabiya*, on his way from Beslan.¹³⁷ Similarly, Nana Lezhava, who covered the events of Beslan for Georgia's independent *Rustavi-2* TV station, was arrested (though never charged) on suspicion of a visa violation.¹³⁸ Russian journalists were also not spared harassment. The editor of *Izvestiya*, Raf Shakirov, was fired two days after the newspaper expressed a critical view of the Government's management of the Beslan crisis. Citing similar reasons, the editor of *Kompaniyam* Andrei Grigoryev also faced dismissal after Beslan.¹³⁹ But the authorities' desire to prevent disagreeable journalists from participating in the reporting of the crisis went much further than this. Anna

¹³⁶ Lev Dzugayev's father passed away several days prior to the incident, so this was a very difficult time period for him.

¹³⁷ 'Izvestia's Chief Editor Raf Shakirov Fired over Hostage Drama Coverage', *MosNews*, 6 September 2004. <<http://mosnews.com/news/2004/09/06/daily.shtml>>.

¹³⁸ 'Georgian Journalists Detained in Beslan Released', *MosNews*, 8 September 2004. <<http://www.mosnews.com/news/2004/09/08/journalists.shtml>>.

¹³⁹ Claire Cozens, 'Russian editor faces sack over Beslan coverage', *The Guardian*, 28 September 2004. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/chechnya/Story/0,,1314666,00.html>>.

Politkovskaya, the *Novaya Gazeta* journalist that for years assumed a highly critical stance toward Russian Government actions in Chechnya, travelled to Beslan immediately after she heard about the school takeover. Given her pro-Chechen position and past track record of serving as a negotiator in the Moscow theatre hostage crisis, Politkovskaya would have likely been able to jumpstart the negotiations. All flights to Beslan from Moscow's Vnukovo airport were full, but at the last moment she was personally approached by an 'airport executive' and placed on a flight to Rostov on Don. After drinking a cup of tea onboard the plane, she started to feel dizzy and then woke up in a hospital in Rostov, having survived 'acute food poisoning'. Politkovskaya claimed that she was poisoned by the FSB in order to prevent her being in Beslan. There is no evidence to back up this claim as all the medical and forensic samples taken at the airport have disappeared.¹⁴⁰ Roughly two years later, on 7 October 2006, Politkovskaya was gunned down in front of her Moscow apartment.

Politkovskaya was not the only opposition journalist to be prevented from reaching Beslan. Andrei Babitsky was detained at the same airport on suspicion of 'trying to smuggle explosives onboard the plane', and was thus prevented from flying. When no explosives were found, Babitsky was released, but then held again shortly afterwards for allegedly attempting to pick a fight with two men at the airport. The whole case was later dismissed, but the damage was done – Babitsky never reached Beslan. Strong suspicions exist that both cases were deliberate efforts to prevent potentially acceptable mediators from reaching the site of the crisis. This has, of course, caused further cracks in

the Kremlin's version that everything possible was done to save the lives of the hostages.

Investigation

Confidence in the authorities' handling of the Beslan crisis was by no means strengthened in the aftermath of the attack nor during the subsequent investigation. Many questions still remain unanswered. The first such question concerns the number of terrorists involved. Official figures indicate that thirty-one terrorists were killed, and one, Nur-Pasha Kulayev, was captured alive. Since the authorities claim that not a single terrorist escaped, the number of terrorists participating in the attack is officially thirty-two. However, there is a consensus among hostages and Beslan residents that the number of terrorists was much higher, with most estimates falling into the range of fifty to seventy attackers. And while the authorities dispute even the possibility that anyone got away, numerous pieces of evidence suggest otherwise. First, there are specific terrorists who 'disappeared' after day two, never to be seen again even among the bodies of the killed terrorists. Amongst them was Ali, one of the leaders and the main negotiator. Hostages also report the disappearance of a number of Slavic-looking terrorists, including a woman with fair hair tied in a pony-tail, in black camouflage overalls, holding a sniper rifle and smoking a cigarette,¹⁴¹ and a mysterious 'big, red-haired man with a red face, who spoke Russian without an accent, and whom the hostages were specifically forbidden to look at.'¹⁴² In addition, a number of hostages recognized three militants, Omar Sheykhulayev and Shamil Abidov, and Gadzhi Melikov, who as of 2005 were reportedly at large and on Dagestan's most wanted

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ 'Kulayev Trial: The Missing Slavic Snipers,' Jamestown Foundation, *Chechnya Weekly*, Volume 6, Issue 30, 3 August 2005.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

list.¹⁴³ The hostages consulted while gathering research for this report all agreed, after being shown pictures of these men, that Sheykhulayev was there; about half of them remember seeing Abidov, though only two pointed to Melikov. Their absence on the list of identified terrorists has, of course, other explanations as well. Only nineteen of the bodies have actually been identified,¹⁴⁴ while the rest are so dismembered that their faces are not recognizable, five of them so badly that it was not even possible to obtain fingerprints.¹⁴⁵ As a result, it is possible that at least some of the 'missing' terrorists are among these unidentifiable bodies. Nevertheless, this does not explain the fact that the Federal troops reported having a shoot-out with Sheykhulayev and several of his men in Dagestan on 5 January 2005,¹⁴⁶ and that Melikov was killed only on 26 August 2006 in Makhachkala.¹⁴⁷ Similarly, Iznaur Kodzoyev – whose wife was summoned to the school on day two to try to convince her husband to release the children – was killed not in September 2004 in Beslan, but instead, in his native village of Al'tievo in April 2005.¹⁴⁸

Overall, it is more than probable that a number of terrorists did actually get away from the school, which is hardly surprising given the chaos at the scene and the fact the terrorists were equipped with civilian cloth-

ing and other items to help them escape. The more serious issue, though, is the failure of the authorities to acknowledge this possibility, which has led to a further upsurge of conspiracy theories and a considerable drop in faith in the Government. This is further exacerbated by the fact that one source close to the investigation claims to have arrested three terrorists, and even witnessed the interrogation of one of them – Vladimir Khodov.¹⁴⁹ Yet Khodov's body has clearly, and unanimously, been identified among the dead terrorists by the hostages and investigators alike. This did not, however, stop the North Ossetian police spokesman from claiming that Khodov had been captured alive but committed suicide the next day. 'You understand,' he added, 'that is the official version.'¹⁵⁰ Additional questionable statements regarding the identity of the attackers were also made. Originally, the authorities indicated that at least ten of the terrorists were Arabs, one was a 'black negro from Africa' and one a Korean. This was a clear move to support the Kremlin's argument that the Beslan attack was the work of international terrorism, in an attempt to prove a definitive and direct connection between the Chechens and Al-Qa'ida. The 'black negro from Africa' was in fact a Chechen terrorist killed on day one, whose body was blackened

¹⁴³ Madina Shavlokhova, 'Beslan Gunmen Recognized Among Living', *Izvestiya*, 21 November 2005.

¹⁴⁴ This identification problem extended to the hostages as well. At least five bodies had to be exhumed due to false identification. A large number of bodies have still not been identified. Those parents that were not sure whether the bodies were really those of their children, were told that they would have DNA tests run at Rostov-on-Don for €300, a large sum for most Beslan residents. Similarly, many parents were not allowed to keep their children's bodies in the morgue due to insufficient space, and were forced to rent space in refrigerated trucks for 300 rubles per night.

¹⁴⁵ Sergey Dyupin, 'The Investigation is Hitting it on the Head,' *Kommersant*, 15 September 2004.

¹⁴⁶ 'Federal Forces Battle Handful of Dagestani Militants,' Jamestown Foundation, *Chechnya Weekly* Volume 7, Issue 1, 5 January 2006.

¹⁴⁷ 'Rebel Warlord Killed Saturday in South Russia', *MosNews*, 27 August 2006.

<<http://www.mosnews.com/news/2006/08/27/warlord.shtml>>.

¹⁴⁸ PRESS-RELEASE #1251: Special operation in Al'tievo. <<http://friendly.narod.ru/2005-2e/info1251e.htm>>, 14 April 2005.

¹⁴⁹ 'Russian Commando Says Officials Concealing Truth Behind Beslan,' *MosNews*, 4 November 2004.

<<http://www.mosnews.com/news/2004/11/04/vasskp1.shtml>>.

¹⁵⁰ Franchetti, Mark and Campbell, Matthew, 'How a repressed village misfit became the butcher of Beslan', *The Sunday Times*, 12 September 2004. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2089-1257953_1,00.html>.

¹⁵¹ The number of Arabs is a rare point of agreement between the official version and Basayev's version.

from the gym fire, and the number of Arabs present was just two.¹⁵¹ According to German secret services, they were citizens of Syria and Jordan.¹⁵² According to other sources, they were Algerian nationals.¹⁵³

Overall, the botched official Beslan investigation has discredited nearly everyone involved in it. The school itself was never sealed off for a forensic examination of any

kind. Many items that ended up being critical pieces of evidence only entered the investigation after they were collected directly by the people in Beslan and handed to the authorities. At the time of writing, the authorities continue to release controversial and contradictory pieces of 'evidence', the provenance of which is, invariably, disputed.

¹⁵² 'Arab Mercenaries in Beslan Said Citizens of Syria, Jordan,' *ITAR-TASS*, 5 September 2004.

¹⁵³ Nick Paton Walsh, and Peter Beaumont, 'When Hell Came Calling at Beslan's School No 1', *The Observer*, 5 September 2004.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

In the aftermath of Beslan, Basayev – unsurprisingly – placed all the blame on Moscow, declaring that he regretted that ‘so many children died at the hands of the Russians’, though did not regret the seizure of the school itself.¹⁵⁴ But unlike Dubrovka, he did not make any attempt to plead for international sympathy; rather, he threatened to attack ‘citizens of states whose leaders support Putin’s Chechen policy’, and proclaimed that ‘we would sooner set this world on fire than refuse to fight for our freedom and independence!’¹⁵⁵ In another interview conducted in January 2005, Basayev confirmed his intention to launch more ‘Beslan-style’ operations in the future.¹⁵⁶

On 10 July 2006, Basayev was killed in the Ingush village of Ekhazhevo. He was riding in one of the cars escorting a truck filled with 220 pounds explosives in preparation for an attack when the truck, hitting a pothole, exploded. Since then, the Chechen separatist movement has suffered many setbacks. However, Basayev did leave behind a network of so-called ‘Caucasian Front’ militants, which now operate in Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, North Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Adygea, Stavropol, and Krasnodar. Another Beslan-style operation on Russian territory is therefore likely, if not inevitable.

More disturbingly, current developments suggest that similar operations may

also be carried out by other groups outside of Russia. Basayev is now an icon within international *jihadi* circles, and other groups around the world have taken note of his signature tactic. In issue ten of al-Qaida’s online manual, *Al Battar*, mentioned at the beginning of this report, the late Abdul Aziz al Muqrin offers detailed instructions on carrying out barricade hostage operations, making numerous references to the tactics used in ‘Shamil’s operation in Moscow’.¹⁵⁷ For the newly formed independent cells behind the majority of today’s spectacular worldwide terrorist attacks, online materials form a key component of their operational blueprints.

In *al Battar*, al Muqrin employs a strikingly analytical, almost academic approach to identifying the scope of possible purposes and goals of launching what he calls ‘overt kidnappings’. These include the ‘shedding of light on a specific cause, forcing a government or a group to carry out certain demands, or putting governments in a politically embarrassing situation’. Al Muqrin also argues that history is full of examples of very successful hostage-takings, above all ‘the operation carried out by Commander Shamil Basayev in Moscow... which was 100 per cent successful because it brought the cause back to the world arena.’ This breakdown demonstrates the high level of strategic calculation on the part of the con-

¹⁵⁴ Statement of Chief of the Military Council of State Defense Council «Majlis al-Shura» of Chechen Republic of Ichkeria Abdullah Shamil Abu-Idris concerning the events of 23-26 October 2002 in Moscow. Internet. Available at <<http://62.212.121.113/www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/articlebe27.html?id=605>>.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ Kavkaz Center: Transcript of Shamil Basayev Interview for Channel 4 News. Internet. Available at: <<http://kavkazcenter.com/eng/article.php?id=3500>>. Accessed on 8 April 2005.

¹⁵⁷ Mansfield, Laura, ‘Chechen terrorists follow al-Qaida manual’. Available at: <http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=40298>. Accessed on 12 December 2004.

temporary *jihadi* groups. Barricade hostage-takings are designed to achieve real time comprehensive and pragmatic goals, not just the simple killing of hostages, as has sometimes been suggested in the context of crises, such as Beslan and Dubrovka. As such, negotiations still have a prominent role to play in resolving these situations. Further, al Muqrin's point about making a cause 'global' is also intimately linked to the visual aspect of the event. This is one of the reasons why al Muqrin considers a hostage-taking operation to have a 'missionary component as well' and thus instructs hostage-takers to observe the Sharia at all times and not to look at women. He even declares: 'You must keep your word, as our religion has taught us, so don't kill any hostages after the enemy has accepted your terms and is carrying them out.' This suggests at least the plausibility of terrorists keeping their promises when they, for instance, 'guarantee' safety to the negotiator when requesting face-to-face negotiations.

With regards the negotiation process itself, al Muqrin instructs the hostage-takers to pay close attention to the negotiator – the key figure who can 'strike fear and disappointment in the hearts of hostage-takers as he works to know the personality and the psychological condition of the kidnappers and their respective morale. He would know immediately if the [hostage-takers'] morale was down or whether [they] were determined and ready to carry out [their] threats.' Al Muqrin also claims, erroneously, that the negotiator is most likely the leader of the response team, who has the authority to give the go ahead for the storming of the location. (Negotiations are practically never handled by the commanding officer, in order to exploit the deferment of authority strategy.)

Recalling Dubrovka, al Muqrin stresses that the incident must not be prolonged since the 'capability of the group gets weaker by the day and tensions rise.' In order to achieve a prompt fulfillment of their demands, the

hostage-takers are instructed to execute hostages in the beginning of the incident to prove their willingness to carry out their threats. Though his call for executions is only applicable to those hostages that are 'eligible for such action'. This suggests that despite the acceptability of killing hostages, selection should not be indiscriminate. It is specified elsewhere, that these 'eligible hostages' include the 'security element'. In other words, members of the police or military forces found among the hostages. The manual also prescribes the separation of the young men who 'constitute a threat with their youthfulness'. Understanding the logic for the selection of specific hostages for execution and the circumstances in which these killings occur will become vital to the analysis of whether the terrorists are indeed prepared to kill *all* of their hostages indiscriminately, or alternatively whether negotiation might stand a chance. At the same time, it is important to note that many of the instructions in the manual also focus on disrupting the formation of the Stockholm syndrome in order to preserve the hostage-takers' resolve to kill their hostages if necessary. These measures include the instructions to keep the faces of the hostage-takers and the eyes of the hostages covered at all times, and to only approach the hostages in cases of emergency and necessity, keeping the distance to no less than 1.5 metres. Such measures are designed to limit interaction with the hostages, and thus reduce the chances of their humanization in the minds of the hostage-takers.

Implications

In the era of traditional terrorism, barricade hostage-takings represented one of the most influential terrorist tactics. Their capacity to attract wide international attention, and thus a platform for the expression of grievances, without necessarily killing civilians, seduced many aggrieved groups in the past. Indeed, the majority of hostage incidents ended in a

peaceful outcome.¹⁵⁸ With the rise of the so-called 'new terrorism', which places much greater emphasis on killing, barricade hostage incidents had temporarily assumed a much less prominent role in the tactical repertoire of terrorist organizations. Recently, however, we are witnessing a resurgence of such incidents with a greater willingness of the terrorists to execute hostages, more unconditional suicidal posture of the perpetrators, involvement of large teams of hostage-takers armed well enough to repel a possible rescue operation, prior knowledge of the operational 'cookbook' of hostage negotiation and response teams, and meticulous prior planning. From first glance, it is clear that the response to such incidents requires a different protocol for negotiation than used in the past, as well as a re-evaluation of the rules of engagement.

Incidents like Beslan, as well as manuals such as the *al Battar* 10, suggest that while we should certainly expect the resolution of future hostage incidents to be extremely challenging – owing to the hostage-taker's extensive knowledge of operational procedure, security precautions, and a high level of distrust in the authorities' intentions – there is still room for a negotiated settlement. Whether we will succeed in this endeavour in the future will largely depend on the political sanction of the use of negotiations to resolve hostage crises, as well as on our ability to adapt to the different circumstances and requirements of situations involving ideologically inspired hostage-takers. Unfortunately, terrorist hostage incidents involving no loss of life are likely to be rare. At the same time, as long as there is an understanding of the principal of *quid pro quo* on behalf of the hostage-takers, negotiations are possible. And even in such situations where a tactical resolution will be required to end the crisis, the negotiation element will still be crucial, as it can be used to get the maximum num-

ber of people out of the target location before the storming.

Outside of the negotiation realm, Beslan also highlights the importance of establishing and maintaining a well-organized response scene, as well as media management. In hostage situations, every element needs to communicate with each other under a clear chain of command. Any disruptive elements such as armed outsiders need to be controlled, disarmed, and moved behind a secured perimeter. Given the extreme level of emotion involved, this will require a skilled negotiation effort of its own. Further, effective consequence management will be critical in reducing the negative impact of a possible rescue operation. Quite simply, a timely response saves lives.

Another salutary lesson from Beslan relates to government secrecy and 'spin'. Whilst they may serve a valuable function in the short term to ameliorate specific aspects of a crisis, applying such a strategy in the long-term – indeed, establishing it as policy – will ultimately be counter-productive. When governments are caught covering up and manipulating evidence in the aftermath of a failed counter-terrorism effort, it only benefits the terrorists for whom the embarrassment of a government and the undermining of its authority is a critical component of their grand strategy. Not only must we avoid feeding into this strategy, we also must learn to counter it effectively. Perhaps the best defence is to provide a comprehensive public investigation, akin to the *9/11 Commission Report* following the attacks in 2001 on Washington and New York, published by the US Congress, or the White Paper about the activities of the *Jeemah Islamiyah* cell in Singapore, published by its Home Ministry. Both of these reports reveal in great detail the involvement and activities of the individuals responsible, and hide nothing except very specific sensitive information that

¹⁵⁸ Adam Dolnik, 'Contrasting Dynamics of Crisis Negotiations: Barricade versus Kidnapping Incidents', *International Negotiation* (Vol. 8, No. 3, 2003).

would endanger the security of human intelligence sources. Even more importantly, they facilitate the identification of mistakes and the drawing of lessons learnt, with the goal of ensuring that the same mistakes do not occur in the future. The Russian Government, despite originally dismissing the idea, also finally agreed to conduct a similar open investigation into the events of Beslan. Unfortunately, the report that was prepared by the (Federal) Torshin Commission differs sharply in many of the descriptions of events and conclusions from the report compiled by the (local) Kesaev Commission. In fact, despite taking more than two years to complete, the Torshin Commission simply upheld the initial federal claims, while stripping federal authorities of *any* responsibility whatsoever. The Torshin Commission report simply insisted that there were only thirty-two terrorists who were high on drugs, and who detonated the explosive devices inside, thereby triggering the

storm. Perhaps out of resentment to the more critical Kesaev Commission report, the federal report alleged that the only mistakes made were by the locals. 'The terrorist act was not prevented, because local police did not follow the regulations established by the [federal] Russian Interior Ministry', the report stated. Further, the report even claimed that there is no evidence that tanks and flame-throwers were used to storm the school building. In sum, the Commission's findings were so outrageous that even one of the Commission's own members, Yuri Savelyev, felt the need to present his own report, in which he contradicted most of the official claims. The inability or unwillingness of the federal authorities to admit and identify the flaws in the response to Beslan does more than obstruct accountability of individuals responsible for these mistakes; it effectively inhibits the learning process, which means that Beslan is bound to repeat itself.

On 1 September 2004, a group of terrorists seized more than 1,200 hostages in School Number One in the North Ossetian town of Beslan. It was the first day of the new school year. The deadliest hostage crisis in history was about to unfold.

Based on exhaustive open source research in three languages, examination of thousands of pages of witness testimonies and court transcripts, extensive field research in Beslan, Chechnya, and Ingushetia, and dozens of interviews with hostages, witnesses, relatives, negotiators, and investigators, this report will analyze the various myths and contradictory accounts of the attack, with particular reference to the failed negotiations.

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