

DEFENSELESS TARGETS

Close to 350 die, half of them children, after Chechen rebels take an entire school hostage. What the siege means for Russia

BY J.F.O. McALLISTER AND
PAUL QUINN-JUDGE/BESLAN

CARNAGE: Volunteers hurry to the gymnasium just moments after a bomb exploded and the roof collapsed

YURI TUTOV—AFP/GETTY IMAGES



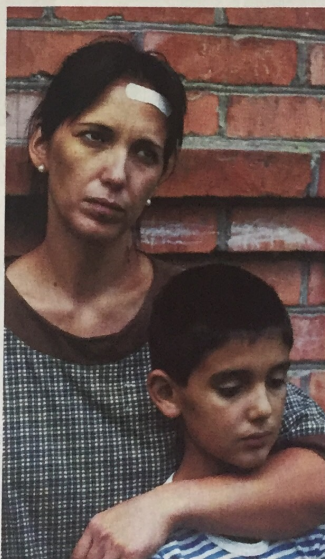
Sometimes it is the gift of children to keep their parents strong.

Elena Kasumova felt her hope dying as she huddled with her son Timur, 9, in the sweltering gymnasium of School No. 1. It was Friday morning, and the hostage nightmare in Beslan, a small town in the Russian republic of North Ossetia, was in its third day. Kasumova, a 37-year-old teacher at the school, and Timur were among the nearly 1,200 hostages packed into the gym. Most of the children had long since stripped down to their underwear; some fainted from thirst, while others drank their own urine. The place was festooned with bombs: explosives hung down from the beams and the basketball hoops, some so low that the taller hostages banged their heads on them as they went to the toilet. That made the guerrillas very nervous. From the bombs came tangled wires snaking through the tight rows of children, connected to two spring-loaded detonator pedals held down by the feet of two guerrillas. If either man moved, the hostages were told, the room would explode. "Bear this in mind," one of the guerrillas said, referring to the Russian commandos who surrounded the building. "They are planning a storm. We will defend you to the last bullet, then blow ourselves up. We have nothing to lose. We came here to die."

Kasumova could see that the guerrillas were tense and exhausted. Since the siege had started, she had counted 16 of them—mostly bearded men in their 20s and most of them Chechen, the rest Ingush and Ossetian—though she suspected other fighters were stationed elsewhere in the school compound. What little mercy they had shown earlier in the siege was now gone. They fired their assault rifles to keep the Russian troops at bay. They bellowed orders at the hostages, refused pleas for water, and threatened to kill if the hostages didn't keep silent. At one point, Kasumova looked down and realized that she was still clutching the program from the celebration of the first day of school.

But when she felt her hope running out, her little boy rescued her. Timur massaged her feet and kissed her, and told her stories about all the water and juice they would drink when it was finally over. "He was so good to me," Kasumova says. Like the other children of Beslan, Timur became a soldier that day.

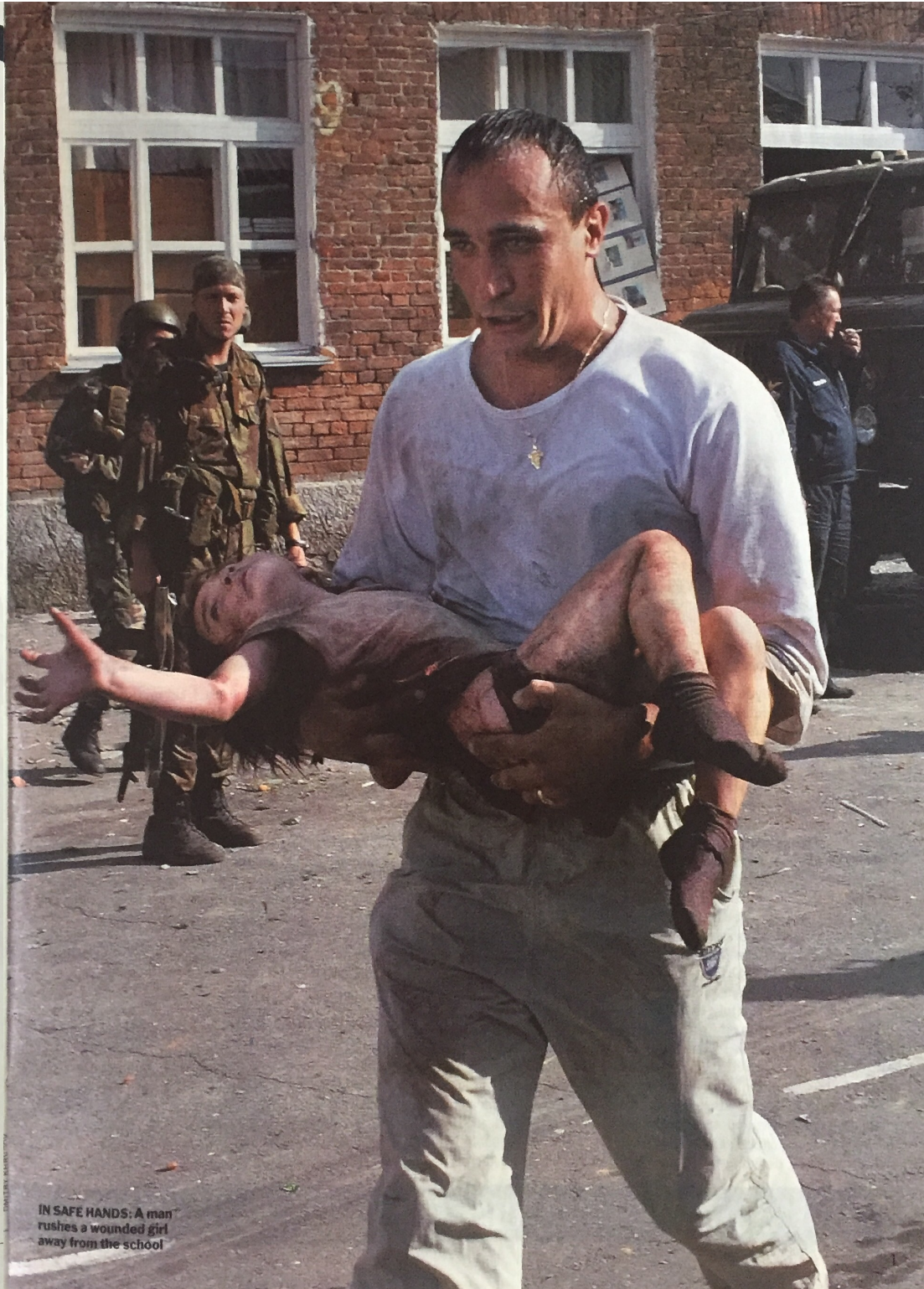
The explosion came at just after 1 p.m. One of those dangling bombs had appar-



SURVIVORS: Teacher Elena Kasumova and her 9-year-old son Timur after their escape

ently detonated. "A wave of burning hot air hit me and knocked me down," Kasumova says. "I saw two severed legs lying next to me." The gym was full of smoke and screams, but she saw children climbing out of a window. She and Timur clambered through the opening and ran. "The guerrillas opened fire on us, and I saw one child go down, and then another," she says.

Russian special forces returned the rebel fire, joined by armed locals who, one general said, "got in the way." Russian soldiers grabbed Kasumova and Timur and hustled them off to safety. Behind them, there were more explosions, the roof of the gymnasium collapsed, and then there was pandemonium. Half-naked children, some burned or wounded, streamed out of the school as bullets whizzed around them and helicopters clattered overhead. The security cordon around the buildings broke down, with locals whisking the injured to safety in their arms, in scruffy little Soviet-era Zhiguli cars and in at least one Mercedes well before ambulances showed up. Police said some terrorists escaped wearing sports gear; gunfire spread to



IN SAFE HANDS: A man rushes a wounded girl away from the school

HOW THE FINAL BATTLE UNFOLDED

An explosion rocked the school. Then hostages tried to escape as a battle raged between terrorists and Russian troops



TIME Graphic by Arthur Phillips

other parts of the city as the afternoon drew on, suggesting a manhunt. In the mayhem, one shocked and disheveled young woman who made it to safety moaned: "They are killing us all!"

By the time it was over, at least 330 people lay dead, including 156 children and 26 terrorists. More than 700 were wounded. The carnage was the latest and by far the most ghastly episode in a terror spree that began in July, leading up to a presidential election in Chechnya that was widely criticized as rigged by Moscow. The vote was made necessary when the Kremlin's hand-picked incumbent, Akhmad Kadyrov, was blown up in May at a rally in Grozny's Dynamo Stadium.

Within one week in July, two bus stops were bombed in the city of Voronezh, 600 km south of Moscow, killing three. On Aug. 24, an explosion ripped through a Moscow bus stop, injuring four. Three hours later, two female suicide bombers detonated explosives on two passenger planes they had boarded at Moscow's most modern airport, downing the planes and

killing 90. On Aug. 31, a woman blew herself up outside a busy Moscow metro station, killing eight others.

But all of that was mere prelude to the school siege, which Russians would come to call their 9/11. President Vladimir Putin went on television Saturday and pledged to strengthen his security services and mobilize the nation against the "total, cruel, full-scale war" being waged on Russia by "international terrorism."

THE ATTACK BEGAN ON THE FIRST DAY OF the new school year, a happy landmark in the Russian calendar, when parents pack snacks and children bring balloons and flowers to give to their teachers. On Sept. 1, parents and children had gathered in the pleasant courtyard of School No. 1, an imposing, century-old brick building set back from the road, to join the traditional festivities. Kasumova was looking forward to another year as the head of the department of moral education.

They were just lining up in the schoolyard when the terrorists, heavily armed

and wearing black ski masks and camouflage, stormed in. "This is a seizure!" they shouted as terrified children tried to flee; a lucky few hid behind heating boilers and got away. The rest were herded into the gym; the rebels mounted a room-by-room search of the school and brought stragglers back.

There was utter panic in the gym. One of the parents tried to calm people down, Kasumova recalled, and a guerrilla put his assault rifle to the man's head and killed him. "His body was there a long while," she says. "Then the guerrillas told people to take it away, and had some girls clean up the blood."

Two of the rebel fighters were women, wearing explosive "martyr's belts." The terrorists assured the hostages that they wouldn't harm them. They said they wanted Chechnya's independence from Russia and an end to the war. Russian authorities later claimed some were Arabs, pointing to a possible al-Qaeda connection, but Kasumova never saw anyone who fit that description.

-  GUN FIGHT
-  HOSTAGES FLEEING
-  TROOPS ENTERING
-  TERRORIST ESCAPING



SHELTER: Soldiers and civilians take cover as special forces storm the school building

To avoid being overwhelmed by narcotic gas like their comrades in the October 2002 Moscow theater siege—in which 41 Chechen terrorists and 129 hostages died—the rebels quickly smashed the school's windows. Putin, apparently keen to avoid the carnage of the theater tragedy, said that protecting the hostages was the government's first priority. Nevertheless, special forces and other crack troops poured into the town of 30,000 and within hours began the planning for an operation to retake the school.

After reviewing the situation—the school layout, the number of terrorists, what was known about the explosives they had deployed—an officer from the Federal Security Service's Alpha antiterror unit told a senior Beslan legal figure that the Moscow theater siege "was a

kindergarten compared to this."

On the first evening of the siege, the town was eerily silent. Large groups of people sat outside their houses on benches where they would ordinarily take the sun, often staring blankly ahead, occasionally bursting into tears. About a thousand relatives gathered inside the local Palace of Culture, which became their informal headquarters. A reporter asked one man if he had children in the school. He wordlessly pulled a camera cell phone from his pocket, showed the pictures he had snapped of his son and daughter that morning, and walked away.

At first, Russian forces strained to avoid provoking the gunmen. The captors regularly loosed gunfire and rocket-propelled grenades in all directions to keep the

city nervous and the Russian troops back, but the Russians didn't return fire.

Inside the packed gymnasium, conditions were grim beyond words. Children were faint from lack of food and water, and from the oppressive heat. The rebels were furious that North Ossetia's President Alexander Dzasokhov would not negotiate with them. "No one will have a single mouthful of water until he contacts us," one of the guerrillas declared. Finally they relented, and allowed a bucket of water to be brought in; people dunked boys' white shirts and girls' pinafores into the bucket and passed the wet clothes down the rows so each hostage could squeeze and suck a little water out of them. The guerrillas told the hostages that Russian television was reporting only 350 of them inside the school. "That means they're planning to storm" the building, Kasumova recalls one terrorist saying. "Dzasokhov doesn't need you." The news sent the hostages into shock.

The rebels were determined to keep the children quiet; like any good teacher, Kasumova knew that was impossible.



AP PHOTO/ARASS/PRESIDENTIAL PRESS SERVICE

"WE ARE DEALING WITH A TOTAL, CRUEL, FULL-SCALE WAR ... WE HAVE SHOWN WEAKNESS. THE WEAK GET BEATEN." —VLADIMIR PUTIN, Russian President



WE MADE IT: A mother and daughter comfort one another after surviving the siege

"You animals! You sheep! Why won't you shut up," one of the fighters yelled. They pulled a male hostage up so everyone could see him. "If you don't shut up, we'll kill him. After that we will kill a woman, then a child."

Regional officials started talking to the gunmen, and Russian diplomats arranged for a late-night Security Council meeting calling for the hostages' immediate freedom. But from inside School No. 1, the terrorists made their own demands: the withdrawal of Russian troops from Chechnya and the release of their comrades imprisoned in Ingushetia. Russian officials ordered broadcasters not to repeat the demands, and an offer by Chechen separatist leader Aslan Maskhadov to go to the scene to negotiate the hostages' safe return, contingent upon guarantees of his own safety, was also suppressed. The terrorists rejected offers of safe passage and suggestions of swapping children for adult hostages, and even turned down offers of food and water—fearing that supplies could be drugged, or that their delivery could provide cover for an attack.

Relatives waiting at the Palace of Culture were growing restless and angry at the lack of news. On the second day, a senior Interior Ministry official and the press secretary of President Dzasokhov showed up to give them a rundown of events. One repeated the official line that there were 354 hostages, which the relatives knew was bunk. "Have you no shame?" a woman shouted. "How can we trust you if you can't even count the number of hostages?" yelled a man. The officials quickly left.

Inside the gymnasium, there was one positive sign. Ruslan Aushev, an Afghan war hero and former President of Ingushetia, went into the school to negotiate. Bitterly disliked by the Kremlin, he is widely respected in the Caucasus because he rejects terrorism but is sympathetic to the Chechen cause. Before he entered the gym, the rebels put on their masks and told the hostages to lie still. Aushev entered the room and surveyed the hellish scene. "I understand," Kasumova heard him say. "There will be negotiations." The masked men agreed to release mothers with babies; 26 people reached safety. But the hostages' relatives milling around the town's Palace of Culture, desperate for news, could still hear sporadic gunfire and explosions coming from the school.

Inside the gym on Friday morning, a



ANGUISH: Terrified and dehydrated, these boys managed to escape from the school

rumor passed from hostage to hostage that they would soon be released. Kasumova didn't know where it came from or whether to believe it. But the guerrillas seemed to be waiting for something, too. A deal had been struck for members of the search-and-rescue service to remove some corpses. Dressed in blue coveralls with bright red stripes, with the logo and initials of the service prominently displayed on their backs, six officers approached the entrance to the gym at about 1:05 p.m. The men weren't wearing bulletproof vests or carrying guns. That's when the great explosion ripped the air, and the final battle began. Two of the search-and-rescue officers were gunned down by rebels.

It still isn't clear what triggered the explosion, whether it was intentional or a mishap. Russian officials say it was a rebel booby trap. The security forces appeared unprepared for the chaos, implying that

the government had not abandoned its commitment to negotiate, but that something had gone awry. "This mêlée seems to have come up quite unexpectedly and went out of control," said one special-forces officer in Moscow. But some journalists on the scene thought the apparent disorganization could have been cover for an attack that had been planned all along, citing as evidence the deployment of crack troops, tanks and special forces the night before, and the imposition of reporting restrictions that often precedes major raids.

NO MATTER WHO INITIATED THE FINAL battle, the deadly result was a crushing defeat for the security forces and for Putin, who has carefully constructed an image as the man whose uncompromising toughness can deliver security to Russians. The bloodbath, with chaotic scenes of half-naked, bloody children running through

the streets, cruelly mocked those promises.

Analysts stressed the danger of a spiral of reprisals between the largely Christian Ossetians, outraged at the school carnage, and the predominantly Muslim Ingush, some of whom were said to be among the hostage takers. Only hours after the siege ended, the reprisals seemed to have begun. According to human-rights activist Timur Aliyev, who was in Beslan during the siege, Ossetians took a handful of Ingush hostages in the village of Chermen, 20 km southeast of the grieving town. "Tensions are mounting," Aliyev says.

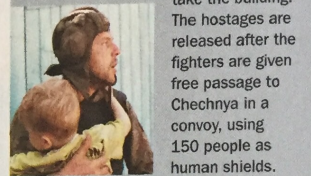
That's bad news for Putin and for the whole of the Caucasus. In 1992, North Ossetia and Ingushetia fought briefly but violently over the disputed district of Prigorodny in North Ossetia. About 1,000 people died, and between 40,000 and 60,000 Ingush were forced out of Prigorodny before Russian troops inter-

"OUTSIDE THE SCHOOL, THE GUERRILLAS OPENED FIRE ON US, AND I SAW ONE CHILD GO DOWN, AND THEN ANOTHER." —ELENA KASUMOVA, teacher at School No. 1

CHECHEN HOSTAGE CRISES: A HISTORY

Seizing captives is a favored rebel tactic

JUNE 1995 Seven months into the first phase of the Chechen war, separatists take 1,600 hostages at a hospital in Budennovsk, in southern Russia. They demand that Moscow stop the fighting and hold talks with rebel President Jokhar Dudayev. During a weeklong siege 120 die, many in failed Russian attempts to



take the building. The hostages are released after the fighters are given free passage to Chechnya in a convoy, using 150 people as human shields.

JANUARY 1996 Chechen fighters take 2,000 hostages at another hospital, this one in Kizlyar in Dagestan. Some 300 rebels move back toward Chechnya, again using hostages as human shields. As Russian forces engage them in an unsuccessful rescue attempt in the village of Pervomayskaya, 78 hostages die. Meanwhile, in an attempt to draw attention to the Chechen cause, nine pro-Chechen Turks seize control of a passenger ferry docked in the Turkish Black Sea port of Trabzon, holding the 242 passengers and crew captive. All the hostages are released when the hijackers surrender to police.

OCTOBER 2002 Chechen insurgents led by Movsar Barayev take control of Moscow's Theater Center on Dubrovka, holding more than 800 people hostage. Women with explosive belts strapped to their waists take part in the raid. After a four-day standoff, Russian special forces storm the building after flooding the theater with an aerosol version of a powerful painkiller, Fentanyl. All 41 guerrillas are killed; 129 hostages also die, many as a result of the Fentanyl derivative.

vened. The conflict has been smoldering ever since. "One push, like a new Ossetian-Ingush war, and the entire Caucasus will be engulfed in one bloody, senseless and hopeless mêlée that Russia will not have enough troops to contain," says Ruslan Khasbulatov, former Speaker of the Russian parliament.

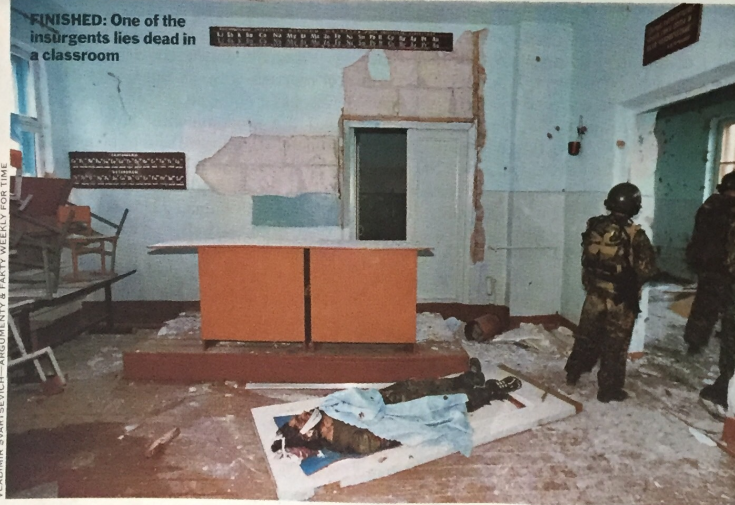
Putin wasted no time declaring he would crack down even harder rather than negotiate a political solution to the Chechen conflict. In his televised speech on Saturday, he paraphrased Stalin: "We have shown weakness. The weak ones get beaten." With the Kremlin claiming that nine of the terrorists in Beslan were of Arab descent—something independent observers have not yet been able to confirm—Putin blamed the crisis on the "direct intervention of international terrorism" aimed at breaking up Russia. He promised a new "set of measures to reinforce the country's unity," as well as tougher rule in the Caucasus and a new "crisis management system" that would enhance the powers of the security services. Some observers, including senior officers in the security services, worried that these new measures could be used to further enhance Putin's power, entrenching the country ever deeper in his authoritarian rule.

The Chechen conflict doesn't fit easily into the "war on terror." Most Chechens do not share al-Qaeda's religious fundamentalism, and they don't seek a return of the caliphate. What they want is their own state, something Putin has vowed never to give them. But Chechen rebels and foreign Islamic terrorists do have links that have grown stronger as the war for independence has dragged on.

Arab militants have been apprehended in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, a former haven for Chechen separatists, and a fundamentalist wing of the Chechen resistance has been gaining influence inside Chechnya. The hard-line guerrilla leader Shamil Basayev, the man alleged to have masterminded the Moscow theater siege, receives money from Middle Eastern and Gulf states, and has produced fund-raising videos with Arabic voice-overs. And the Islambouli Brigades, a little-known group that claims al-Qaeda links, says it brought down the two Russian airliners two weeks ago in revenge against Russian policies in Chechnya—but there is no known connection between the Islambouli Brigades and Chechen separatists.



WASTELAND: Locals survey the wrecked school gymnasium



FINISHED: One of the insurgents lies dead in a classroom



CLEANUP: Emergency workers sift through debris at the school



“ONE PUSH AND THE CAUCASUS WILL BE ENGULFED IN ONE BLOODY, SENSELESS MELEE.” —RUSLAN KHASBULATOV, former Duma Speaker





GOODBYE: Relatives mourn two sisters killed at the school



MORTUARY: The bodies of the dead fill the Beslan schoolyard

Nevertheless, according to Alexey Malashenko, an analyst with the Carnegie Moscow Center, Putin's crackdown has helped to create a radicalized faction within the Chechen separatist movement that has no qualms about turning to al-Qaeda operatives for help. The al-Qaeda connection "is not the cause" of the Caucasus conflict, Malashenko argues. "This is the effect of Putin's policies."

Critics of those policies say Putin's main achievement has been to reduce Russian news coverage of the violence inside Chechnya, thus enabling him to claim to a population tired of the war that the whole region is returning to normal. But in fact, instability is spreading. Late last month, rebels briefly seized control of two districts in the Chechen capital, Grozny, despite the massive presence of Russian forces. In June, rebels simultaneously attacked four towns in Ingushetia, killing at least 79 people—43 of them law enforcement agents and other government officials, including the acting Interior Minister—and looting arms depots at will.

Rebels regularly bomb and ambush Russian forces in Dagestan, inflicting steady losses through a series of lightning strikes and skirmishes. And guerrilla attacks have also recently been reported in previously quiet parts of the Caucasus, like the republic of Kabardino-Balkaria. Putin vows to prevent the breakup of Russia, but doesn't seem to want to acknowledge that his Caucasus policies may be helping to rip the region apart.

Beslan now faces the task of putting itself back together after last week's atrocities. In the wake of the violence, townspeople were drawn to the hospital, the makeshift morgue and the school site; after the bodies and debris had been cleared away from the gym, many stood inside the bombed-out shell, just to bear witness. In such a small town, everyone has lost someone. On Friday evening, one man brought back the body of his 16-year-old nephew from the morgue. "I was not going to leave him there for another night," he said. Two of his nieces survived the siege, but another didn't. "Imagine," he said, "I fought in Afghanistan and Chechnya, but my knees buckled when I saw her name" on a list of the dead outside the hospital. As the night wore on, he dropped his reserve for a moment, and said in quiet anger: "You don't storm and hammer a place where there are hostages. You just don't do that." Putin, of course, would argue that his forces had no choice. —With reporting by Yuri

Zarakhovich/Moscow



WRENCHING REUNION: Families find their murdered loved ones at a nearby morgue