

# BESLAN SCHOOL NUMBER ONE

**Situation:** Chechen terrorists take over 1,100 hostages at a school in Beslan, North Ossetia.

On 1 September 2004, more than 30 armed Chechen terrorists took over 1,100 hostages at a school in Beslan, North Ossetia. During the three day hostage crisis and the failed rescue attempt by Russian forces more than 380 persons died, including more than 180 children.

The attack in Beslan was an attempt to force Russian forces to withdraw from Chechen territory and force the formal recognition of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria.

Undoubtedly, the terrorists knew a large scale attack on a civilian facility would draw international attention and provide an opportunity to expose their agenda to a wider audience.



The attack in Beslan demonstrates the ability of terrorists to plan, organize, and execute large-scale terrorist attacks. The attack also demonstrates the use of indiscriminate violence to further political objectives and gain worldwide media coverage.



Lying at the base of the North Caucasus, Beslan is a small city of about 35,000 people in the Russian republic of North Ossetia-Alania. Beslan is the third largest city in the republic and the administrative center of the Pravoberezhny district. Beslan is an important railway junction and lies along the railway lines between Baku and Rostov-on-Don.

The North Caucasus region has experienced armed conflict and terrorist activity since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In the early 1990s, ethnic Ossetians were separated by the border between the former Soviet republics of Russia and Georgia. As Georgia abolished its independent Ossetian enclave more than 70,000 refugees fled to North Ossetia. Conflict quickly broke out between the new Ossetian settlers and the established Ingush population.

In addition, North Ossetia lies in close proximity to Chechnya, an area seeking independence from the Russian Federation. Chechen and Russian forces engaged each other in two open conflicts. When overt military operations are not ongoing, sporadic fighting and terrorist attacks are common. North Ossetia has been the launching point for several Russian military operations against Chechen rebels and has a significant ethnic Russian population. Ossetians, a predominantly Christian ethnic group, have been accused of aiding Moscow in the persecution of Chechen Muslims.

Since the rise of the Chechen independence movement, Russia, including the North Caucasus region, has witnessed a significant level of terrorist activity. Terrorist attacks attributed to Chechen rebels include the Moscow Theater siege in 2002, the suicide bombing of the Moscow subway system, and the suicide bombing of multiple passenger aircraft. In North Ossetia, Chechen forces have been responsible for kidnappings, assassination, and suicide bombings.

The history of terrorist activity in an area provides insight into potential current conditions. Before arriving, determine if acts of terrorism have occurred in the past and if the conditions surrounding those attacks still exist.

One September was the first day of school in Beslan. Local tradition requires a ceremony to welcome first grade children to the school. Beslan's School Number One was the center of activity with the school's student body, faculty, and numerous parents concentrated in a small area outside the school.



Shortly after 9:00, at least one military vehicle arrived at the school. Quickly, armed men wearing masks jumped from the vehicle shouting and firing guns into the air. Many ceremony attendees were stunned and some believed they were witnessing a Russian forces security drill.

As the confusion of the situation evaporated, attendees realized it was a terrorist attack. Immediately, about 50 people escaped through the open gate of the school grounds and fled the area before it was blocked by the terrorists. Others unsuccessfully attempted to hide in the boiler room which was located in a building next to the school. One attendee, a local man who was armed, drew his weapon and fired at the terrorists. The terrorists quickly returned fire and killed the man.

The initial moments of a terrorist attack are critical. In an active shooter or hostage incident you must decide how to respond. If possible, an attempt to escape may be your best chance for survival. If escape is not possible, you should look for opportunities to hide or shelter in a room or building that can be locked or barricaded. Depending upon the circumstances, active resistance may be appropriate. However, if active resistance is used, you must be prepared to be aggressive and be fully committed to your actions.



The terrorists quickly herded the hostages into the school's gymnasium. The gym was small, measuring about 84 x 45 feet. In all, the terrorists succeeded in capturing over 1,100 persons, almost 800 of them children.

In the gym, the terrorists provided instructions. Hostages were ordered to surrender cell phones and cameras, speak only when addressed to by one of the captors, and speak only in Russian.

Violation of rules would result in executions of women and children. One father stood and translated the demands into Ossetian. Once he had completed the translation he was shot in the head.

The terrorists then prepared to defend their position. One group of terrorists stayed in the gym to guard the hostages. At the same time, they strung bombs above the heads of hostages and along the floor. The bombs were filled with ball bearings, nails, bolts and other items. They were connected together and wired into a switch on the floor connected to a pressure plate. One of the terrorists stood on the plate. The mechanism would detonate the bombs if the terrorist's foot was removed as a result of an escape attempt or rescue operation. At the same time, adult males were organized into teams and forced to barricade doors leading into the school. They were also instructed to knock out windows to allow air circulation in the event the Russian military attempted to use gas to subdue them. After completing the fortifications, many of the men were shot.

[If you are captured and resistance is not realistic try not to draw attention to yourself or provide a reason to be singled out. Comply with the demands of your captors and try to conceal your American citizenship and DOD affiliation.](#)

Conditions in the school gym declined rapidly. While windows in some parts of the school were purposely broken out, the windows in the gym were left in place. As a result, no fresh air relieved the hostages from the heat caused by unseasonably hot weather and the concentration of so many people in such a small area. Space was also limited and hostages had to take turns extending their legs and stretching. The terrorists provided hostages with virtually no food or water and rarely allowed any to go to the restroom. Some hostages fainted or passed out and all were weakened from the conditions.



To counteract the heat many hostages stripped off their clothing. To cool their faces, wash blood from their bodies, and stay at least minimally hydrated, bottles of urine were collected and passed around the gym.

It is very important to maintain your physical strength in a hostage crisis. If possible you should exercise at least a little each day. Also, try to maintain your nourishment to the maximum extent possible. Consume all food and water provided by your captors; even if it is disagreeable.



During the crisis, some hostages were able to escape or improve their conditions. One man escaped by jumping from a second story window. He had been instructed to dump bodies from a second story window in a classroom where men who had been forced to fortify the building were executed. When the guard in the room was manually reloading his weapon, he leapt through the window. Once on the ground he rolled to the wall of the building to make the shooting angle from the window more difficult. He then crawled toward rescue personnel trying to move between parked cars.

Another hostage developed a personal rapport with one of the terrorists by asking simple questions such as his name and where he was from. Later, the terrorist offered to release her children and family members if she agreed to become a Shahidka. The terrorists' two shahidkas, female suicide bombers that wear all black clothing and veils, had died when one of their suicide vests mysteriously exploded. She refused the offer.

Another hostage, the father of two children in the gym, had been an engineer in the Russian army. He used his knowledge to covertly disarm the bomb that hung above the heads of his family. His actions saved their lives when many bombs later exploded during the Russian rescue attempt.

Your actions in captivity will be dictated by circumstances and your personal determination of your chances for survival. In some circumstances, escape may be your only chance to survive. At other times, you may be able to win favor from your captors and improve your immediate conditions, gain your release, or buy time until a rescue attempt can be mounted or negotiations completed.

On the third day of the crisis, shortly after 1:00 p.m., two explosions occurred within thirty seconds of each other. It is unknown if the explosions were caused by the terrorists or the Russian military. However, the explosions instantly killed scores of hostages in the gym, set off many of the bombs that



had been placed above the heads of the hostages, and set the roof of the school on fire. Fortunately, the explosions also broke out windows in the gym that allowed many hostages to escape. Some not able to escape made their way into other rooms in an attempt to hide. Others feigned death until rescuers arrived. Many too injured to escape burned to death under the collapsing and burning roof.

After recovering from the blasts, the terrorists took many surviving hostages into the school cafeteria. The cafeteria would be the place of their final stand due to the iron bars on the windows. The terrorists forced women and children to stand in front of the windows to discourage the Russian military from firing. Others were allowed to seek shelter behind pots and pans, under sinks, or in pantries. Russian and Chechen forces exchanged gunfire and grenades were used to stop Russian forces as they entered the building.

Slowly, Russian forces regained control of the school. Over the next few hours, survivors were carried out of the school and transported to hospitals. Sporadic gunfire could be heard throughout the day and much of the night as Russian forces engaged the remaining terrorists in the school.

Remember that if you are in an active shooter situation there are actions you can take to improve your chances of survival. Most importantly, try to find cover behind something solid. If gunfire is exchanged, crouch to the floor. If grenades are used lay flat on the floor with your feet toward the direction of the grenade.

In all, 300 to 400 hostages lost their lives in the Beslan school attack, including at least 180 children. An unknown number of Russian military personnel and terrorists were also killed. One terrorist, Nur-Pashi Kulayev, survived and was arrested at the scene. Kulayev is currently serving a life sentence at an undisclosed location and under an unknown name.

The Russian government received immense criticism for its handling of the Beslan school attack. From an operational perspective, speculation persists that Russian military forces precipitated the final battle at the school by causing the initial first two explosions; possibly by using T-72 tanks or RPGs. In addition, Russian forces are accused of shooting several hostages that were used as human shields in the cafeteria.



The Kremlin was criticized for what opponents call a disinformation campaign. Initially, the Kremlin put the number of hostages at 354; an allegation that enraged the terrorists who were listening to news reports via radio and may have worsened the treatment of the hostages. Also, the government initially denied that the terrorists made any demands upon the government or released a video; a claim proven false when Russian news services aired the video. In addition, the government has not been able to finalize the number of hostages, military forces, or

terrorists killed in the attack. The government claim that all terrorists were either killed or captured has also been criticized since many hostages have testified that some terrorists were not included in the pictures of dead terrorists that they were shown during the investigation into the attack.

After the attack, the Russian government instituted reforms to improve the response of the federal government in future crises. Opponents have argued that these reforms are an attempt to centralize more powers for the Kremlin leadership.