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Chechen rebels attack theater, take hostages

MOSCOW (AP) — About 50 armed Chechen rebels stormed a crowded theater during a musical show Wednesday night and took hundreds of theater-goers hostage in an audacious and well-planned attack. Police and security forces surrounded the building amid sporadic gunfire.

Moscow police spokesman Valery Gribakin said about 100 women and children had been let out of the theater, and news reports quoted some of them as saying there were pools of blood in the theater halls.

Those released did not see any dead bodies, but said the hostage-takers had beaten some in the audience. Two pregnant women were later released.

"The terrorists are demanding one thing - the end to the war in Chechnya," Gribakin said.

Russian news reports said the rebels offered to release 50 more hostages if Akhmad Kadyrov, the head of Chechnya's Moscow-appointed administration, came to the theater.

Earlier reports said the armed men and women were laying land mines inside the theater and had explosives strapped to their bodies which they threatened to blow up if Russian security forces stormed the building.

Gribakin, the police spokesman, said there were about 600 people inside the theater when it was seized.

A woman who made her way out of the theater told a television interviewer the men wore camouflage as they took the stage, fired into the air and said: "Don't you understand what's going on? We are Chechens."

News reports said the hostage-takers arrived in jeep-like vehicles just as the second act of the play was about to begin. When police and security forces surrounded the theater, the attackers opened fire and threw a grenade. One of the hostages, a doctor, was treating a hostage-taker who was wounded.

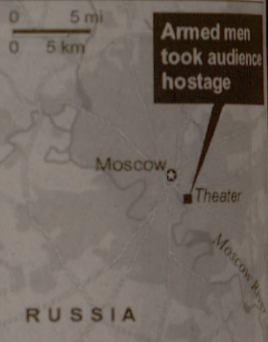
Russia is involved in a bloody war in Chechnya, seeking to put down a decade-old separatist insurrection in the oil-rich region. News reports cited a Chechen rebel Web site as saying the group was led by Movsar Barayev, the nephew of warlord Arbi Barayev, who was reportedly killed last year. The Web site said some of the women hostage takers were widows of Chechen rebels killed in the war with Russia.

"By the scope it can only be compared to the tragedy in New York. The situation is extreme now," liberal Russian lawmaker Boris Nemtsov said in a television interview. "We must start a dialogue."

Senior Russian officials had no immediate comment on the hostage taking which, in an

Theater captured

Armed men who claimed to be Chechens took a theater audience hostage Wednesday in Moscow.



SOURCES: Associated Press, ESPN

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Islamiyah blamed for Philippines bombings

MANILA, Philippines (AP) — The United States and Australia have circulated a report blaming Jemaah Islamiyah for several deadly bombings, and hope to have the Muslim organization declared a terrorist group by the United Nations.

The two countries hope a U.N. declaration that the group is allied with al-Qaida would help them launch an international campaign to isolate it and cut its financial support, said a Philippine official, speaking on condition of anonymity. The U.N. Security Council must approve the petition.

Later Wednesday, foreign ministry officials in Singapore and Japan said their governments would join in the effort. The request was to be made Wednesday in New York, said the officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

The U.S. State Department added the group to its own list of terror groups on Wednesday, making it a crime to contribute funds to it and barring members from entering the United States.

The group is suspected in the Oct. 12 bombing of a nightclub that killed more than 180 people on the Indonesian island of Bali, but Secretary of State Colin Powell, in a statement distributed to reporters, said the "United States does not wish to imply that we have come to a conclusion about responsibility for the devastating Bali bombings."

Jemaah Islamiyah's spiritual leader, Abu Bakar Bashir, who has denied any wrongdoing, was arrested last week on suspicion of involvement in several church bombings that killed 19 people in Indonesia two years ago.

"Abu Bakar Bashir has repeatedly denied the existence of Jemaah Islamiyah," said his lawyer, Achmed Michdan. "He rejects the allegation that he is connected to any terrorist group. Let the U.S. declare anything they want."

The confidential U.S.-Australian report details Jemaah Islamiyah's history and alleges it is linked to a number of attacks.

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By TH

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