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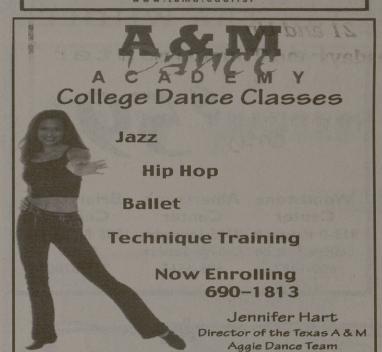
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Thursday, September 2, 2004

Attackers seize school in Russia hold hundreds hostage

By Mike Eckel THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BESLAN, Russia — Armed militants with explosives strapped to their bodies stormed a Russian school in a region bordering Chechnya on Wednesday, corralling hundreds of hostages many of them children — into a gymnasium and threatening to blow up the building if surrounding Russian troops attacked. At least two people were killed, including a school parent.

Camouflage-clad forces carrying assault rifles encircled Middle School No. 1 in the North Ossetian town of Beslan. Earlier, a little girl in a flowered dress fled the school holding a soldier's hand; officials said about a dozen other people managed to escape by hiding in a boiler room.

A militant sniper took position on a top floor of the threestory school, and hours into the standoff Russian security officials used a phone number they were given and began negotiations with the hostage-takers — widely believed linked to Chechen rebels suspected in a string of deadly attacks that appeared connected with last Sunday's presidential election in the war-ravaged republic.

More than 1,000 people, including many distraught parents, crowded outside police cordons cusing the government of failing to protect their children.

'I've been here all day, waiting for anything," said Svetlana Tskayeva, whose grown daughter and three grandchildren aged 10, 6 and six months were among the captives. "They're not telling us anything. ..."It's awful, it's

The hostage-taking came less than 24 hours after a suicide bombing outside a Moscow subway station that killed at least nine people, and just over a week after near-simultaneous caused two Russian planes to crash, killing all 90 people on

The recent bloodshed is a blow to President Vladimir Putin, who Chechnya's rebels but instead ingly strike civilian targets beyond the republic's borders.

"In essence, war has been declared on us, where the enemy is unseen and there is no front," Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov told reporters before the hostage-taking.



A sniper watches the school seized by attackers in Beslan, North Ossetia. Attackers wearing suicide bomb belts seized a Russian school in a region bordering Chechnya on Wednesday, taking hostage about 400 people, half of them children, and threatening to blow up the building. At least two people were killed, one of them a parent who resisted an attacker.

a week interrupted his working holiday in the Black Sea resort of Sochi and returned to Moscow to deal with the unfolding

President Bush called Putin hostages and the other terrorists attacks in Russia," White House spokeswoman Claire Buchan said. Bush offered "assistance" to Russia in dealing with

From inside the school, the militants sent out a list of detage-taker killed and 20 children Kazbek Dzantiyev, head of the North Ossetia region's Interior Ministry, was quoted as telling the ITAR-Tass news agency. Sporadic gunfire and explosions could be heard throughout the standoff. One girl lay woundemergency workers could not approach because the area was coming under fire, said regional Emergency Situations Minister Boris Dzgoyev.

There were conflicting casu-

ITAR-Tass, citing local hospitals, said one person died at the scene and seven in hospi-

Putin for the second time in tals. Dzgoyev put the death toll at four, and the Federal Security Service chief for North Ossetia, Valery Andreyev, later said two civilians were killed — including a school parent — and two wounded.

Shortly after 9 a.m., the attackers drove up in a covered truck similar to those used for military transport. Gunfire broke out, and at least three teachers and two police were wounded, said Alexei Polyansky, a police spokesman for southern Russia.

Most of the hostages were herded into the school gym, but others — primarily children were ordered to stand at the windows, he said. He said most of the militants were wearing

At least 12 children and one hiding in the building's boiler room during the raid, said Ruslan Ayamov, spokesman for North Ossetia's Interior Ministry. Media reports suggested that as many as 50 other children fled

Hours after the seizure, the militants sent out a blank videotape, a message saying "Wait" and a note with a cell phone number, Russian officials and media said. Andreyev, the federal security official, said "for a long time we could not make contact" with the attackers, but being held now.

INTERNATIONALNEWS

THE BATTALIOTHE BAT

Andreyev said there might 120-300 captives, while an of cial at the Emergency Situati Ministry branch for sout Russia said authorities belie the number was 336. Earlie ficials had said up to 400 peo were taken captive.

"The main task is to free children alive — and everybod located there, but the most said. He said the hostage-tak

Earlier, the school attacked demanded talks with region officials and a well-known pon terro diatrician, Leonid Roshal, wwon, der aided hostages during the dead tion of w seizure of a Moscow theater Victor Victor 2002, Polyansky said. the num

They also demanded the a drop in series of attacks on police fac ties in Ingushetia in June, ITA that hav Tass reported, citing regionattention

nd other Parents of the seized chil videotaped an appeal to Puir Presid urging him to fulfill the tinuing rorists' demands, said Fat Khabolova, a spokeswoman

We pray to God that this mreversed end without bloodshed," said hthat it is rina Dzhibilova, whose two so were inside. Distraught, she slam an

Panama president takes office, offers referendum on canal

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

PANAMA CITY, Panama -Martin Torrijos, the son of a former dictator, took office as Panama's president Wednesday promising jobs, better relations with Cuba and a referendum on a proposed \$8 billion expansion of the Panama

Torrijos said Panamanians should decide on the proposal to widen the canal for a new generation of bigger ships because of its high cost for this poor nation, where 40 percent of the people live in poverty.

He also promised an investor-friendly government that is concerned for the poor. "Doing business in Panama has become a headache," he said.

Torrijos had tough words for his predecessor, Mireya Moscoso, calling her term "five years of wasted opportunities." "We receive a country full of youth without hopes," he added.

A Texas A&M graduate with a degree in economics, Torrijos promised an austere, honest government and said public finances were "in a deplorable state whose magnitude we have

The inauguration was a world, including Secretary

State Colin Powell and Taiv

ese President Chen Shui Bian Torrijos' late father, (Omar Torrijos, signed a deal then-President Carter that led the handover of the Panama nal from U.S. to Panamanian thority and many Panaman remember him fondly for achievement.

"He showed us that it was sible to achieve independent with dignity and bravery," new president said of his fath

Like his father, Torrijos f key negotiations with the Ur States, this time talks on a trade agreement started by coso. He said he favored trade but promised to cons with groups worried they m lose out in a treaty.

While Panama has seen economy grow 7 percent over last 18 months thanks to a Sw like banking system, a large trade zone and business relate the canal, government income not kept pace. It has trouble me ing its payroll and Panama's erous social security and per system is headed for bankrupto

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