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**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 special 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 three-story 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 demanding information and accusing 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 frightening."

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 explosions blamed on terrorism caused two Russian planes to crash, killing all 90 people on board.

The recent bloodshed is a blow to President Vladimir Putin, who pledged five years ago to crush Chechnya's rebels but instead has seen the insurgents increasingly 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.

Putin for the second time in a week interrupted his working holiday in the Black Sea resort of Sochi and returned to Moscow to deal with the unfolding crisis.

President Bush called Putin and "condemned the taking of hostages and the other terrorists attacks in Russia," White House spokeswoman Claire Buchanan said. Bush offered "assistance" to Russia in dealing with the crisis if requested, but that no request had been made so far, the White House said.

From inside the school, the militants sent out a list of demands and threatened that if police intervened, they would kill 50 children for every hostage-taker killed and 20 children for every hostage-taker injured, 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 wounded on the school grounds, but emergency workers could not approach because the area was coming under fire, said regional Emergency Situations Minister Boris Dzugoyev.

There were conflicting casualty reports.

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

itals. Dzugoyev 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 suicide-bomb belts.

At least 12 children and one adult managed to escape after 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 in the chaos as the attackers were raiding the school.

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

that authorities reached them by phone and that "negotiations are being held now."

Andreyev said there might be 120-300 captives, while an official at the Emergency Situations Ministry branch for southern Russia said authorities believe the number was 336. Earlier, officials had said up to 400 people were taken captive.

"The main task is to free the children alive — and everybody located there, but the most important thing is the children," he said. He said the hostage-takers had refused offers of food and water.

Earlier, the school attacker demanded talks with regional officials and a well-known pediatrician, Leonid Roshal, who aided hostages during the seizure of a Moscow theater in 2002, Polyansky said.

They also demanded the release of fighters detained over a series of attacks on police facilities in Ingushetia in June, ITAR-Tass reported, citing regional officials.

Parents of the seized children videotaped an appeal to Putin urging him to fulfill the terrorists' demands, said Fatima Khabolova, a spokeswoman for the regional parliament.

"We pray to God that this ends without bloodshed," said Marina Dzhibilova, whose two sons were inside. Distraught, she was supported by her sisters.

Panama president takes office, offers referendum on canal

Eloy O. Aguilar
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 Canal.

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

not yet begun to discover."

The inauguration was attended by officials from around the world, including Secretary of State Colin Powell and Taiwanese President Chen Shui Bian.

Torrijos' late father, General Omar Torrijos, signed a deal with then-President Carter that led to the handover of the Panama Canal from U.S. to Panamanian authority and many Panamanians remember him fondly for the achievement.

"He showed us that it was possible to achieve independence with dignity and bravery," the new president said of his father.

Like his father, Torrijos favored key negotiations with the United States, this time talks on a free trade agreement started by Moscoso. He said he favored free trade but promised to consult with groups worried they might lose out in a treaty.

While Panama has seen its economy grow 7 percent over the last 18 months thanks to a Swiss-like banking system, a large free trade zone and business related to the canal, government income has not kept pace. It has trouble meeting its payroll and Panama's generous social security and pension system is headed for bankruptcy.

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