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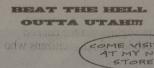
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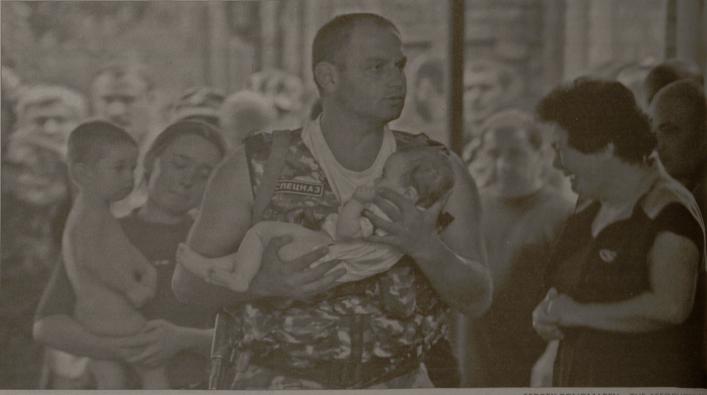




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SERGEY PONOMAREV . THE ASSOCIATED

A special forces soldier holding a baby is followed by a woman carrying a child after being

at least 26 women and children on Thursday from the provincial Russian school where

# Hostages released at Russian school

By Mike Eckel THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BESLAN, Russia - Camouflage-clad commandos carried crying babies away from a school where gunmen holding hundreds of hostages freed at least 26 women and children high drama that kept crowds of distraught relatives on edge.

Men and women wept with disappointment or hugged each other with relief as a man read the names of the freed hostages over a loudspeaker. Some of the toddlers released were naked, apparently because of the stifling heat in the school, where the hostage-takers refused to allow and medicine for the captives.

Tensions had risen earlier when

the militants fired grenades at two cars near the compound ringed by security forces, and hours later two blasts interrupted a nervous calm during the night. A policeman was reported injured by one of the explosions after midnight.

President Vladimir Putin said everything possible would be done to end the "horrible" crisis and save the lives of the children and adults being held at School No. 1 in Beslan, a town in the southern region of North Ossetia.

But it was uncertain how much either side was willing shed in the siege — the latest incident in a series of violent attacks believed linked to Russia's war in Chechnya. A dozen people were reported killed by the attackers when the school was captured Wednesday, but one official said Thursday that Reports after the standoff be-

gan Wednesday said the attackers demanded the release of people jailed after attacks on police posts in June that killed more than 90 people in Ingushetia, a region between North Ossetia and Chechnya. But officials said Thursday that the hostage-takers had not clearly formulated their demands.

Late Thursday, Lev Dzugayev, a North Ossetia official, said his pre-vious statement that 354 hostages were seized Wednesday might have been too low, and many in ber was much higher. "Putin: at least 800 people are being held hostage," read a sign held up for television cameras.

Relatives, friends and neighbors crowded outside barricades blocking access to the school gasped when the hoste release was announced by Da gavey, an aide to the preside of North Ossetia.

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Dzugayev and other offici said 26 women and children various ages were released. Russian media reported that or woman went back to be withle at the crisis headquarters so another group of five hostage was let go separately.

An Associated Press Tele vision News reporter saw women and at least three infant

Dzugayev called the release "the first success" of negotia tions and said they came af school, by Ruslan Aushev, a for republic who is a respected fig-

## Stocks soar despite mixed data

By Meg Richards THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK - Stocks strode higher in a late-session buying surge Thursday, as oil prices stepped back from their highs and investors shrugged off mixed economic data, focusing with renewed optimism on the government's upcoming jobs report. The Dow Jones industrial average jumped more than 120 points.

The markets grew increasingly more upbeat Thursday as rumors swirled among traders that President Bush would allude to bullish job growth numbers in his speech on the final night of the convention. Still, analysts were puzzled by the strength of the rally.

"Could it just be that there's no one in, volume is low, and there's nothing new negative?" said Janna Sampson, director of Portfolio Management at Oakbrook Investments. "People might be thinking, 'You know, I want to be in for September, I want to do it

According to final results, the Dow soared 121.82, or 1.2 percent, to 10,290.28, its highest point in seven weeks.

The broader gauges also rose sharply. The Nasdaq composite index added 23.02, or 1.2 percent, to 1,873.43. The Standard & Poor's 500 index gained 12.40, or 1.1 percent, to 1,118.31.

In economic news, worker productivity rose a disappointing 2.5 percent in the spring, the smallest gain since late 2002. The reading by the Labor Department, which measures the amount an employee produces for every hour on the job, missed economists' estimates for a rise of 2.8 percent, and was down sharply from the 3.7 percent pace posted in the first quarter.

Market watch

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