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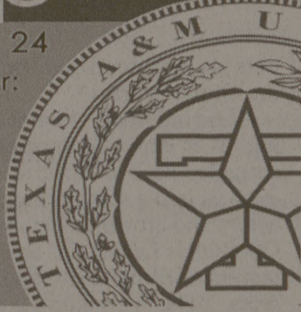
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Boys hold a wreath during funeral for a hostage killed in the school siege in Beslan, Russia Monday Sept. 6, 2004. In Beslan, townspeople crowded around the coffins of children, parents, grandparents and teachers ahead of the 120 burials scheduled in the town cemetery and adjoining fields Monday.

Trying to cope Russia mourns victims of school siege

By Burt Herman
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ESLAN, Russia — Funeral processions filled the rainy streets of this southern Russian city Monday, carrying coffins large and small, as townspeople buried scores of victims of a carefully planned school siege that prosecutors linked to a Chechen rebel leader.

Desperate families searched for those still missing from the siege at School No. 1, while others buried 120 victims during the first of two days of national mourning across Russia, which has seen more than 400 people killed in violence linked to terrorism in the past two weeks.

Reports emerged that the attackers apparently planned the school seizure months in advance. There also were signs that some of the militants did not know they were to take children hostage and may have been killed by their comrades when they objected.

State television also sharply criticized government officials for understating the scope of the crisis, in which hundreds of hostages were held for 62 hours by heavily armed militants who reportedly demanded the withdrawal of Russian troops from Chechnya.

On Monday, wailing women stroked the coffins or kissed wooden stakes that bore the names of victims until tombstones could be put in place in Beslan's cemetery. Passing trains sounded their horns in respect. A fuzzy, pink rabbit adorned one of the caskets.

Police erected heavy security cordons on the road leading to the cemetery before a visit by a high-level government delegation including Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov, the president of North Ossetia, the speaker of the Russian parliament and the prosecutor-general.

Among the first buried were Zinaida Kudziyeva, 42, and her 10-year-old daughter, Madina

Tomayeva. Relatives said they tried to flee when the first explosions went off and were caught in firing between militants and Russian forces.

"They couldn't run away. They didn't have time," said Irakly Khosulev, a relative from nearby Vladikavkaz. "Someone should answer for this."

A prosecutor said the militants belonged to a group led by radical Chechen rebel Shamil Basayev. A man identified by authorities as a detained hostage-taker said on state TV that he was told that Basayev and separatist former Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov were behind the attack.

Mikhail Lapotnikov, a senior investigator in the North Caucasus prosecutors' office, said on Channel One television that investigators have established the assailants were "the core of Basayev's band" and had taken part in a June attack — also blamed on Basayev — targeting police and security officials in neighboring Ingushetia.

The detainee, identified by a lawyer as Nur-Pashi Kulayev, said on both state-run channels that he and other members of the group were told the goal of the raid was "to unleash a war on the whole of the Caucasus" — the same thing President Vladimir Putin said was the attackers' aim.

Criticism of the government response to the tragedy was mounting, with state television chiding officials for understating the magnitude of the crisis, for their slowness to admit that previous recent attacks were by terrorists and for their apparent paralysis.

"At such moments, society needs the truth," Rossiya television commentator Sergei Brilyov said Sunday night.

Brilyov criticized generals who "can't bring themselves to act until the president throws ideas to them." On Saturday, Putin had criticized Russia's law enforcement agencies for failing to rise to the challenge of terrorism.

Two politicians — liberal Irina Khakuda and nationalist Sergei Glazyev — called separately for an independent investigation into the hostage crisis, the Interfax news agency reported.

After the siege ended, Russian news agencies cited unidentified security sources as saying that the planners of the raid were believed to have scouted at least two schools in Beslan.

"Judging by everything, they felt the better one for their goals was the main building of School No. 1 with its half-basement gymnasium annex, where the floor had to be placed," the ITAR-Tass news agency quoted a law-enforcement official as saying.

"The bandits were able to bring into the school a large quantity of weapons, ammunition, equipment and explosives, under the guise of planks, cement and other building materials enough to defend the seized place for a long period," the official said, according to the report.

Interfax quoted a deputy prosecutor saying some weapons and ammunition were brought to the school in advance.

The approximately 30 raiders arrived in a single military-style truck — believed to have been hijacked in neighboring Ingushetia — which, jammed with people, would have been too small to carry much equipment.

Hostages also spoke in news accounts of huge quantities of explosives in the school — only the suicide belts worn by some of the raiders but also bombs hung from basketball hoops.

The school tragedy left few families untouched in the industrial town of 30,000, where many leave their doors unlocked. Most people had relatives, friends or neighbors killed or wounded.

The official death toll stood at 335 Monday, plus 30 attackers; the regional health ministry said 326 of the dead had been in cages, and the Emergency Situations Ministry said 156 of the dead were children.

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