

# Behind the Moscow Theater Siege

By Tony Karon Friday, Oct. 25, 2002

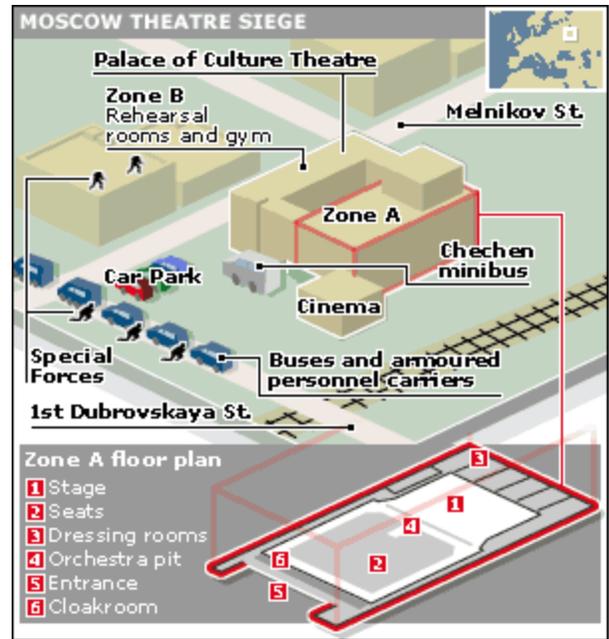
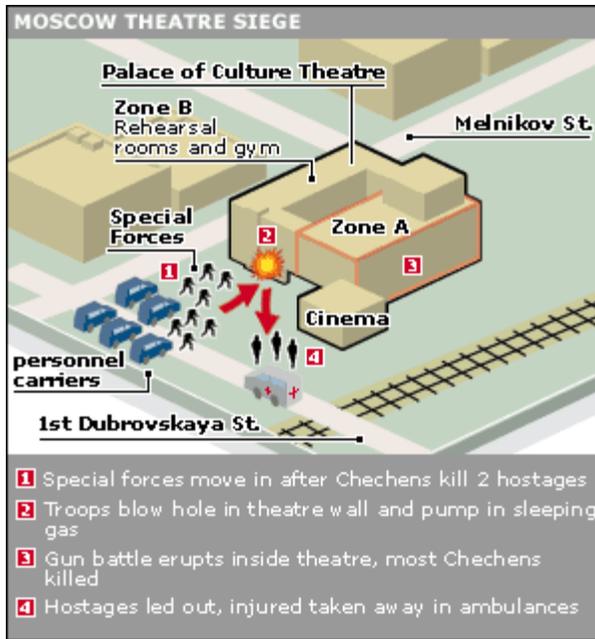
ANTON DENISOV/ITAR-TASS/AP



Two doctors remove the body of a slain female hostage in Moscow

The Moscow theatre hostage drama is a dramatic reminder that Chechen separatists are capable of desperate cruelty when they're up against a wall. Some 700 hostages remain captive in a large theater complex Friday, cowering for a third day under the guns of 30 or 40 Chechens — half of them reportedly women in headscarves; all of them reportedly wearing the explosive belts of the suicide bomber — who have threatening to blow the building unless Russian forces withdraw from Chechnya. The Chechens have reportedly set a deadline of 6am, Moscow time (10pm, EST) for their demands to be met, after which they'll begin executing their captives. They have

described themselves as "smertniki" — those condemned to death, or kamikaze — and have killed at least one hostage who had tried to flee. Although Russian special forces have surrounded the building, they insist they won't storm it unless the Chechens start executing hostages. Negotiations aimed at a peaceful resolution continue.



Although President Vladimir Putin immediately linked the siege with the global war on terrorism, and charged that the action was planned in a "foreign terrorist center," its roots more likely lie in a long-established tradition among Chechen insurgents of mounting dramatic terror strikes aimed at tilting the balance of power back in their favor. The latest siege is reminiscent of the hostage drama at Budennovsk in 1995, when Chechen rebels led by Shamil Basayev seized a Russian hospital in order, he later said, to make Russians suffer the way Chechens had suffered. Although 166 hostages died when the very same Russian anti-terrorism unit that is currently surrounding the Moscow theater stormed the Buddenovsk hospital, Basayev and his men escaped. And soon afterwards, Moscow concluded an autonomy deal with Chechen leaders. This time, however, things are different: The man in charge in Moscow has built his presidency in no small part on his tough handling of the Chechen insurgency; and the rebels mounting this siege are of a younger, more militant generation less inclined to negotiate. Nobody's expecting the current siege to result in a new deal for Chechnya.





[an error occurred while processing this directive]The attack is, however, a major embarrassment for Putin, because it undermines his claim — officially announced last April — that the war in Chechnya is over. By restricting media coverage, Kremlin claims of success in the breakaway republic have gone largely unchallenged at home, except by occasional dramatic events such as the killing of 119 Russian personnel when a military helicopter was shot down in August. But violence in Chechnya has been ongoing, with large numbers continuing to die on both sides. And the fact that a heavily armed group of this size was able to travel undetected from the Caucasus to the capital may increase Russian skepticism of the efficacy of military efforts to extinguish the Chechen rebellion.



Visitors to Chechnya over the past six months note a growing belief among young Chechens that theirs is a "doomed generation," fated to be killed by the Russians whether they take up arms or simply stay at home waiting to be taken away in a police security sweep. And that perception has fueled an inclination to go down fighting. Now, a sophisticated terror operation has brought Muscovites face to face with the ongoing war, undermining President Putin's claims of victory and forcing him to cancel his planned attendance at an Asia-Pacific summit where he was to have held talks with President Bush this weekend.

The Russian leader is not wrong about links between the Chechen insurgency and al-Qaeda: Arab volunteers have long fought in Chechnya under a Saudi commander known simply as Khattab (killed in action earlier this year), who had fought in Afghanistan and was believed to have been close to Osama bin Laden. And a few score al-Qaeda operatives took refuge alongside Chechen fighters hiding in Georgia last winter. Even there, however, there were clear differences — the al-Qaeda operatives urging the Chechens to attack Western targets in Russia, while many local Chechen commanders showed little interest in global 'jihad,' seeing their own priority as a struggle for national survival. That didn't discourage the al-Qaeda elements from providing support to the Chechens, and their relationship is clearly fraternal — and likely to grow in the circumstances currently prevailing in Chechnya. But given the history and context, it is also safe to assume that the Chechen insurgency would continue even if bin Laden's jihad were snuffed out.



Although the Chechens inside the theater have vowed to die, the history of such standoffs suggests that the longer the stalemate persists, the greater the chances that the attackers, confronted with their own mortality, will look for a way out. One option reportedly being negotiated is a deal giving them safe passage to a third country, possibly Turkey, in return for releasing the hostages. But signs are that the traditional guidelines may not apply here: The rebels' demands are absolute and uncompromising, suggesting they're driven by an apocalyptic interpretation of their faith and their prospects. And even if a peaceful solution were possible, the danger remains ever-present that a mistake by either one of the gunmen or one of the Russian units could trigger a bloodbath.

Even if the Moscow standoff is resolved without serious casualties, it's unlikely to be the last such attack by a separatist movement increasingly desperate to break Russia's stranglehold on its home turf. But Moscow is unlikely to be forced back to negotiating by

terror attacks. The standoff is more likely to amplify Russia's demand for a green light from the West to act against NATO-friendly Georgia, where many Chechen fighters continue to find sanctuary.

—*With reporting by Paul Quinn-Judge/Moscow*

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