

Beslan school hostage crisis



The Beslan school hostage crisis (also referred to as the Beslan school siege) began when armed terrorists took hundreds of school children and adults hostage on September 1, 2004, at School Number One in the Russian town of Beslan in North Ossetia. On September 3, 2004, the third day of the standoff, shooting broke out between the hostage-takers and Russian security forces. According to official data, 344 civilians were killed, 186 of them children, and hundreds more wounded.

Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev took responsibility for the hostage taking, reportedly led by his principal Ingush deputy Magomet Yevloyev.

[Timeline of the *Beslan school hostage crisis* - Wikipedia](#)

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First September

On "First September" of every year in every school (most are public) in the Russian Federation, citizens celebrate a holiday known as the "Day of Knowledge" at school. The children are commonly accompanied by their parents and other family members and dressed in their finest clothes. After listening to introductions and speeches from the staff and students, the "First Graders" give a flower to the "Last Graders". The Last Graders



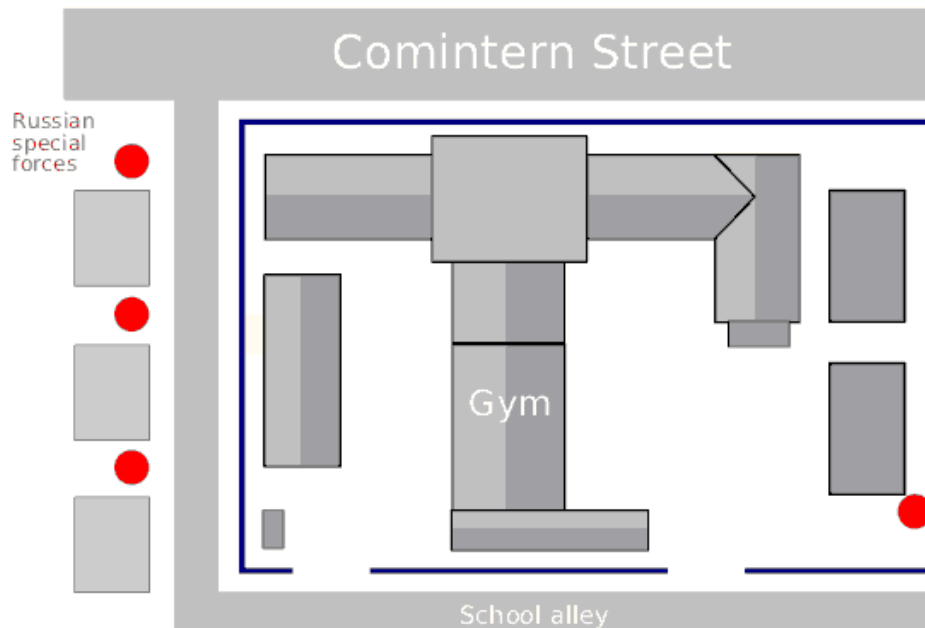
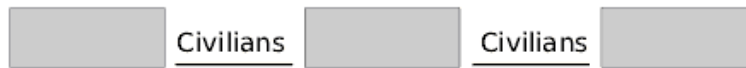
then take the First Graders to their first class. In 2004, on the first of September at School Number One in Beslan, this tradition was deliberately used by terrorists as an opportunity to seize the school and take hostages. The end result was

hundreds of children and entire families wounded or killed.

Course of the crisis

Day 1

At 09:30 local time (GMT+3) on September 1, 2004 — the morning of the first day of the autumn term — a group of around thirty armed men and women, arriving in a GAZel van and a GAZ-66 military lorry, stormed Beslan's Middle School Number One, whose pupils were aged from seven to eighteen years old. Most of the attackers wore black ski masks and a few were seen carrying explosive belts. After an exchange of gunfire with police, in which five officers and one perpetrator were killed, the attackers seized the school building taking more than 1,300 hostages. This number was confirmed by teachers later. Many hostages were schoolchildren under the age of eighteen. There were also many parents and staff inside. About fifty people managed to flee to safety in the initial attack and alert authorities.



Overhead map of school showing initial positions of Russian forces

At first there was confusion about how many hostages were left inside. The Russian government stated that there were about 354 hostages within. Other sources stated that there were as many as 1,000. Repeated shooting was later heard coming from the school buildings, thought by some to be for the intimidation of security forces. It was later revealed that the attackers had killed twenty adult, male hostages and thrown their bodies out of the building that day. The attackers were also outraged by the authorities diminishing the number of hostages.

A security cordon was soon established around the school, consisting of Militsiya and Russian Army forces, OSNAZ, including the Alpha Group of the FSB, and members of the OMON unit of the MVD.

The attackers moved the hostages to the school gymnasium on the first day, mined the gym and the rest of the building with improvised explosive devices, and surrounded it with tripwires.



In a further bid to deter rescue attempts, they threatened to kill fifty hostages for every one of their own members killed by the police, and to kill twenty hostages for every gunman injured.

They also threatened to blow up the school should government forces attack. The Russian government initially said that it would not use force to rescue the hostages, and negotiations towards a peaceful resolution did take place on the first and second days, led by Leonid Roshal, a pediatrician whom the hostage-takers had reportedly asked for by name. Roshal had helped negotiate the release of children in the 2002 Moscow Theatre Siege.

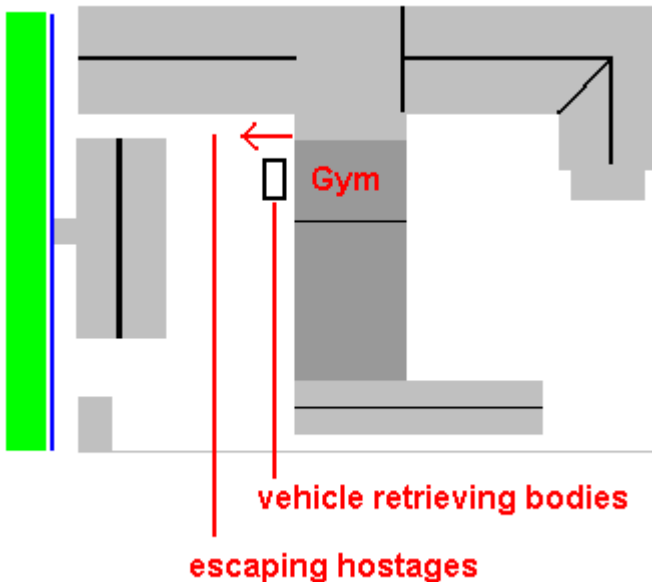
At Russia's request, a special meeting of the United Nations Security Council was convened on the evening of September 1, at which the council members demanded "the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages of the terrorist attack". U.S. President George W. Bush reportedly offered "support in any form" to Russia in dealing with the crisis.

Day 2



On September 2, 2004, negotiations between Roshal and the hostage-takers proved unsuccessful, and they refused even to allow food, water and medicines to be taken in for the hostages or for the bodies of the dead to be removed from the school.

Many hostages, especially children, took off their shirts and other articles of clothing because of the sweltering heat within—which led to rumors of sexual assault, though the hostages later explained it was merely due to the stifling heat.



In the afternoon, the gunmen agreed to release 26 nursing women and their infants following their negotiations with former Ingush President Ruslan Aushev, to whom they handed off a nursing infant whose mother refused to leave the school because of her other children .

At around 15:30, two explosions occurred at the school about ten minutes apart from each other. These were later revealed to be the explosions of rocket-propelled grenades, which had been fired by the hostage-takers in an apparent attempt to keep the security forces well away from the school.

Day 3

On the afternoon of September 3, 2004, the hostage-takers agreed to allow medical workers to remove bodies from the school grounds.

The removal team, reported consisting of FSB (Federal Security Service, formerly known as KGB) officers, began to approach the school, but in a few seconds, at around 13:04, the hostage-takers opened fire, and two large explosions were heard.

Two of the medical workers died; the rest fled under a hail of gunfire. Part of the

gymnasium also collapsed, allowing a group of about thirty hostages to escape, but they



were fired on by the gunmen, while also having to dodge fire from the Russian army and armed civilians who tried to fire at the terrorists; many of the escapees were killed.



• **Presidential advisor Aslambek Aslakhonov** later said that the cause of firing and the subsequent storming of the school had been a spontaneous explosion — according to an escaped hostage, one of the bombs had been insecurely attached by an adhesive tape and had fallen and exploded.

• **In a conflicting account**, an anonymous employee of the Ministry of Emergency Situations said that the shooting began after the medical workers' truck arrived at the pick-up point. He did not know whether the armed fathers of hostages or the hostage-

takers fired first (see the article in Izvestia below). Other witnesses reported hearing increasing automatic weapons fire before the blasts.

These two accounts may be reconcilable. Ruslan Aushev, a key negotiator during the siege, told the Novaya Gazeta that an initial explosion was set off by an hostage-taker accidentally tripping over a wire; as a result, armed civilians, some of them apparently fathers of the hostages, started shooting. Reportedly, no security forces or hostage-takers were shooting at this point, but the gunfire led the hostage-takers to believe that the school was being stormed; in response, they set off their bombs.

• **The third version** has it that a couple of female bombers blew themselves up as soon as they heard gunfire. This contradicts to the following sources.

The surviving hostages' stories such as the one by the Alania soccer team's cameraman Karen Mdinradze published by Newsru September 17 . The man lost his eye and saw others hurt by the blast which killed the bombers long before the storm.

The captured suspect hostage taker Kulayev's story (see Investigations below).

The September 17 statement attributed to Shamil Basayev where only 2 female perpetrators were mentioned .

However, the more likely and most widely accepted version among the local populace, fourth version, is that a special forces sniper shot the terrorist who was sitting with his leg on a detonator. The reports as to the reasons for this action are conflicting. While some, especially government sources, say that it was an unauthorized action that the sniper took upon himself, military training that special forces undergo and lack of any investigation into this suggest that the shot was authorized by the authorities in order to resolve the hostage crisis.

Apparently, it was at this point that Russian special forces activated their action plan to storm the school to rescue any possible survivors. A chaotic battle broke out as the special forces sought to enter the school and cover the escape of the hostages. Some panicked Russian army conscripts fled the scene, while the special forces commandos blew holes in walls to allow hostages to escape. A massive level of force was used; as well as the special forces, the regular army and Interior Ministry troops were also engaged, as were helicopter gunships (including Mi-24 Hinds and Mi-8 Hips) and at least one tank (most probably two T-72s and one either T-80 or T-90) as well as several BTR armoured personnel carriers. Many local civilians also joined in the battle, having brought along their own weapons. Afterwards, the Russian government defended the use of tanks and other heavy weaponry, arguing that it was used after surviving hostages escaped from the school. However, this contradicts the eyewitness accounts and common sense, as many hostages were seriously wounded and could not possibly escape by themselves.

The attack was followed by more large explosions of a further detonating bombs and

several Shmel fuel-air explosive rockets used by the government forces, totally destroying the gym and setting much of the building on fire. By 15:00, two hours after the assault began, Russian troops claimed control of most of the school. However, fighting was still continuing in the grounds as evening fell, and three gunmen were located in the basement along with a number of hostages. They were eventually killed, along with the hostages they were holding.

During the battle a group of hostage-takers, said by the government to number thirteen, broke through the military cordon and took refuge nearby. Two of those thirteen were reportedly women who allegedly attempted to blend into the crowd and escape disguised as medical personnel. The military cordon had been compromised by permitting the passage of hostages' relatives, dressed in civilian clothing and, in some cases, bearing firearms.

A few of the escapees were said to be cornered in a residential 2 story house within 40 metres from the gym. Whether or not they had hostages was unknown. The house was destroyed using tanks and flame throwers by 23:00 September 3, 2004.

Deputy Prosecutor General Alexander Fridinsky said that 31 of 32 attackers had been confirmed dead and one had been seized.

One suspected hostage-taker was beaten to death by the fathers of hostages when he was injured and driven to the hospital. Another suspected terrorist was lynched on the scene, an event filmed by the Sky News crew.

According to the official data 331 civilians and 11 commandos died. At least one surviving female hostage committed suicide after returning home. Many other survivors remained in severe shock. Some injured survivors died in hospitals.

The Russian government has been heavily criticized by many of the local people who, days after the end of the siege, did not know whether their children were living or dead. Some human remains were even found by a local man in the nearby garbage dump several months later, prompting further outrage.

During the operation 11 fighters of the special groups Alpha and Vypel were killed, among them the commander of Alpha - the highest casualties in a single engagement in these units' history. One of the members of these units said that the reason for such large losses had been that fighters had first of all rescued children and the hostage-takers had then shot at their backs (another commando admitted shooting children used by the terrorists as a human shields). In addition, many were accidentally hit by a civilian militiamen, who either fired indiscriminately or mistook them for the hostage takers. Wounds of varying severity were received by more than 30 fighters of the OSNAZ special forces.

Days 6 and 7

Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered a two day national mourning for September 6, 2004 and September 7, 2004. The second of these days saw 135,000 people join an anti-terror government rally on the Red Square in Moscow. Putin then cancelled planned meetings with German chancellor Gerhard Schröder in Hamburg and in the federal state of Schleswig-Holstein.

Identities of those responsible

On September 17, 2004, Chechen terrorist Shamil Basayev issued a statement claiming responsibility for Beslan school siege. Newspaper reports have also linked his Ingush deputy, Magomet Yevloyev, to the school attack.

The crisis was strikingly similar to the 1995 Budyonnovsk hospital hostage crisis and the 2002 Moscow theater hostage crisis in which hundreds were held hostage by a Chechen fighters, also led by or answering to Shamil Basayev.

Initially, however, the identity of the attackers was not immediately clear. It was widely assumed that they were separatists from nearby Chechnya, but Aslambek Aslakhonov had denied it: "They were not Chechens. When I started talking with them in Chechen, they had answered: ***We do not understand, speak Russian***".

The Russian government had stated that the attackers were an international group consisting of some Arabs and even one local resident.

The Chechen separatist leader Aslan Maskhadov denied that his forces were involved in the siege. He condemned the action and all attacks against civilians via a statement issued by his envoy Akhmed Zakayev, currently resident in London.

Some of the 32 hostage-takers, which included 5 women, are tentatively named:

Polkovnik Ruslan Tagirovich Khochubarov (leader, disputed identity)

Vladimir Khodov - nicknamed Abdullah, Ossetian from nearby Elkhotovo where he was wanted for detonating a bomb in the marketplace. (leader, though Basayev has since said he was an FSB double agent)

Magomed Yevloyev - nicknamed Magas, Ingush national also involved in the Basayev's attack on Nazran (leader)

Ali Taziyev - Ingush ex-policeman, debate rages whether an alias/stolen identity of Khochubarov or Yevloyev

Doku Umarov - 40-year-old warlord that hostages reportedly claimed to recognise, saying he was the only one to not wear a mask. He definitely did not die in Beslan however, since he is still an active Chechen field commander.

Khaula Nazirov - 45-year-old member of Black Widows from Grozny, husband had been tortured to death five years earlier by Russians (possibly a leader) her 18-year-old son - cousins were killed a year earlier when Russia bombed a school in Chechnya her 16-year-old daughter - cousins were killed a year earlier when Russia bombed a school in Chechnya

Khizir-Ali Akhmedov

Magomed Aushev

Sultan Kamurzaev

Magomet Khochubarov - had a prior conviction for possessing illegal firearms

Izaur Kodzoyev

Nur-Pashi Kulayev - 24-years-old Chechen, the sole surviving hostage-taker

Hanpashi Kulayev - one-armed brother of the above, a former bodyguard of Shamil Basayev, also called Khan

Adam Kushtov - 17-year-old Ingush who fled the 1992 ethnic cleansing in North Ossetia to Ingushetia

Abdul-Azim Labazanov - 31-year-old Chechen, born in Kazakhstan, initially fought on the federal side in the First Chechen War

Arsen Merzhoyev - 25-year-old Chechen native of Engenoi

Mairbek Shainekhanov (also spelled Mayrbek Shaybekhanov) - arrested shortly before the school attack

Buran Tetradsze - 31-year-old native of Rustavi in Georgia

Issa Torshkoev - 26-year-old Ingush native of Malgobek where he was unable to find work - five of his friends were killed in March 2004 after his house was raided by Russian police. Had a prior conviction for robbery.

Musa Tsechoyev - 35-year-old Ingush native of Sagopshi, owned the GAZ-66 that drove the hostage-takers to the school

Bei-Alla Tsechoyev - 31-year-old brother of above, also spelled Bay. Had a prior conviction for possessing illegal firearms

Slav nicknamed only **Fantomas** - thought to have also been a bodyguard to Shamil Basayev, his body was identified by Nurpashi as "a gorilla-like bald-headed man, dressed in a vest and black uniform trousers".

a Negroid

a Russian-Korean

On September 12th 2005 however, the lead prosecutor against Kulayev announced that only 22 of the 32 bodies had been identified, lending more confusion to which identities are confirmed.

28-year-old **Akhmed Merzhoyev** and 16-year-old **Marina Korigova** of Sagopshi were both arrested by Russian authorities in November 2004, Merzhoyev is charged with providing food and equipment to the hostage-takers, and Korigova with having possession of a phone that Tsechoyev had phoned multiple times - Korigova was released when her defence attorney Sharip Tepsoyev showed that she was given the phone by an acquaintance after the crisis.

Five unnamed 'suspects' were killed around the same time, though their names are unknown.

Russia has also claimed that al-Qaeda agent **Abu Omar as-Seif** was responsible for financing the attack, though some are skeptical about this claim, pointing out that the government may believe that it is politically beneficial to strengthen ties to the global "war on terror" by involving al-Qaeda rather than admit the terrorism results from their policies in Chechnya.

Demands

The hostage-takers in Beslan are reported to have at first made the following demands:

Withdrawal of Russian troops from Chechnya.

Presence of the following people in the school:

Aleksander Dzasokhov, president of North Ossetia,

Murat Ziazikov, president of Ingushetia,

Alu Alkhanov, president of Chechnya (other reports name presidential advisor

Aslambek Aslakhonov, or Mukharbek Aushev, Duma member representing Ingushetia),

Vladimir Rushailo, Executive Secretary for the Commonwealth of Independent States.

Investigations

ITAR-TASS reported a territorial law enforcement source told them that militants disguised as repairmen had concealed weapons and explosives in the school in July 2004 after visiting three schools in Beslan, but this version was later refuted.

The suspected hostage-taker **Nur-Pashi Kulayev**, 24, born in Chechnya, was captured and was identified by former hostages. The state-controlled Channel One showed fragments of his interrogation. Kulayev said the group was led by a Chechnya-born militant nicknamed "Polkovnik" (Colonel) and by Khodov, 28, who was a suspect in the May 15, 2004, Moscow-Vladikavkaz train bombing.

According to Kulayev, Polkovnik shot a militant and detonated two female suicide bombers because they objected to capturing children in the midst of the siege.

Kulayev recognized the body of a short man with a barrel-like torso, a fiery red beard and a freckled face as Polkovnik. The official investigators identified Polkovnik as Ruslan Tagirovich Khochubarov born in the village of Galashki of the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Republic in 1972 .

The official version of the Polkovnik's identity was refuted in the message attributed to Basayev. According to the message, Polkovnik was a colonel of the Ichkeria forces Orstkhoyev. The message suggested that the Kulayev's testimony could be forced by his interrogators.

The authorities linked the third body to Magomet Yevloyev nicknamed Magas. Magas was an Ingush from the Chechen capital Grozny who, together with the notorious Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev, prepared an attack on Ingushetia on June 22, 2004, in which 98 people were killed.

Kulayev recognized the body of a bald-headed man dressed in a vest and black uniform trousers as belonging to a militant nicknamed Fantomas.

Nur-Pashi Kulayev is represented by Umar Sikoyev.

At the press conference with foreign journalists Vladimir Putin rejected the prospect of an open public inquiry (The Guardian, September 7, 2004) but cautiously agreed with an idea of investigation (i.e., a parliamentary commission) by the Duma. He warned though that the latter might turn into a "political show".

On November 27, 2004, the Interfax news agency reported Alexander Torhsin, head of the parliamentary commission, as saying that there was evidence of involvement by a foreign intelligence agency. He declined to say which, but said "when we gather enough convincing evidence, we won't hide it".

On January 28, 2005 the parliamentary commission revealed their investigation found that Russian and Beslan government officials were also involved in the attack.

Russian authorities claimed that the hostage-takers had "listened to German hard rock group Rammstein on personal stereos during the siege to keep themselves edgy and fired up." The claim has not been independently confirmed and the Russian authorities are known to have been concerned that Rammstein was too appealing to "undesirable" elements in Russian society.

On May 17, 2005, Nur-Pashi Kulayev, the sole survivor of the suspected hostage-takers, was put on trial in Vladikavkaz. He has been charged with terrorism, murder, hostage-taking and other crimes.

On December 26, 2005 Russian prosecutors investigating the siege on the school claimed that authorities had made no mistakes. Family members of the victims of the attacks have claimed the security forces of incompetence, and have demanded that authorities be held accountable.

Criminal trial

In May 2005, the only known accused terrorist to survive the Beslan massacre, Nur-Pashi Kulayev, was a defendant in Russian court in the republic of North Ossetia. All local lawyers refused to defend Kulayev. Albert Pliyev was appointed, reluctantly, as his lawyer. The local people at the time wanted to either lynch the defendant or sentence him to death penalty. 1,343 people act as the injured party on the trial. Kulayev has been charged with murder, terrorism, kidnapping, and other crimes and has pled guilty on seven of the counts.

Domestic repercussions

Experts agree that failure to save lives may have serious repercussions for Vladimir Putin's administration. Despite earlier promises to peacefully resolve the crisis, Russian special forces resorted to armed force, failed to keep the battleground secure from entry by civilians or exit by the militants, and are struggling to provide consistent reports of the situation to the media. The Russian government points out that the hostage-takers seemingly opened fire first, compelling the security forces to act in order to save the lives of the hostages.

Putin has since acknowledged that widespread graft and corruption hampered efforts to reform the intelligence agencies and prevent terrorist attacks such as the siege at Beslan. Two reporters known as openly critical to the government could not get to Beslan. Andrey Babitsky, a journalist with the Russian service of Radio Free Europe — Radio Liberty, was indicted of mischief after an alleged conflict with security guards in the Moscow Vnukovo Airport and sentenced to a five-day arrest. The Novaya Gazeta journalist Anna Politkovskaya fell into a coma (see external links) in the airplane bound to Rostov-On-Don and had her health seriously damaged. There are concerns that both incidents were provoked by the Federalnaya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti (Federal Security Service). According to a poll by Levada-Center conducted a week after Beslan crisis, 83% of polled Russians believe that the government has been hiding at least a part of the truth about Beslan events from them.

Regional medical workers were stripped of their mobile phones (see external links) and forbidden to leave local hospitals at the end of their shifts, in what is suspected to be a move to suppress leaks of casualty figures and related information.

North Ossetian Interior Minister Kazbek Dzantiev resigned shortly after the crisis. At the same time, Vladimir Putin fired the head of the republic's Federal Security Service (FSB) branch, Valery Andreyev. The Committee of Beslan Mothers also called for Putin to

dismiss the North Ossetian president Alexander Dzasokhov. Dzasokhov resigned in May 2005, claiming that he has decided "to give way to a younger generation".

Raf Shakirov, chief editor of the Izvestia newspaper, was forced to resign after criticism by the major shareholders of both style and content of the Saturday, September 4, 2004, issue. In contrast to the less emotional coverage by other Russian newspapers, Izvestia had featured large pictures of dead or injured hostages; it also expressed doubts about the government's version of events.



Increased security measures have been introduced in Russian cities. More than 10,000 people without proper documents have been detained by Moscow police. At least one incident of police violence has been recorded. Magomet Tolboev, an aide to Duma deputy from Dagestan, was beaten on a street in Moscow by two policemen because of his Chechen-sounding name. Russian president Vladimir Putin has proposed major reforms to political and security system. According to his plan, governors of Russia's oblasts, which are directly elected under the current system, will be appointed by the president. The election system for Russian Duma will be also changed. The death penalty will be re-introduced

and a system of security alerts will be designed. Resident registration laws will be tightened and it will become harder to buy, sell and borrow cars. The reform plans drew criticism from the United States and European countries, as well as from Russia's liberals. Some critics have alleged that Putin is trying to increase his personal power, using the Beslan crisis as an excuse.

Russian public appears to be generally supportive of increased security measures. Levada-Center poll found 58% of Russians supporting stricter anti-terrorism laws and death penalty for terrorism. 33% would support banning all Chechens from entering Russian cities.

Charity efforts

Countries and charities around the world donated to funds set up to assist the families and children that were involved in the hostage-taking. As of the end of 2004 the International Foundation For Terror Act Victims had raised over \$1.1 million with a goal of \$10 million.

The Beslan town council, itself having organised a charity fund, announced that it would donate \$36,000 to aid the victims of the December 26, 2004, Indian Ocean Earthquake. The council stated that "The whole world reacted to our tragedy, so we cannot remain indifferent either".

In January 2005, an international group representing the organization "Children As the Peacemakers" travelled to Moscow and Beslan on a Peace Mission. The group consisted of 9 Americans, 2 Canadians and 1 Japanese in addition to guides and translators. There were four children in the delegation. The mission was to create a new section of the 'Banner of Hope' dedicated to the victims of the Beslan Tragedy. The Banner is made out of red silk panels and has the names and ages of the children who died written in both english and cyrillic lettering.

This was started by school children in Burbank California. The group in Beslan added pictures of all the victims to the Banner and walked the banner through the streets of Beslan. They also gave gifts and warmest wishes to the survivors and relatives. It was an emotional journey, and a harsh reality, but the people of Beslan welcomed the group with incredible kindness and generosity, proving that hardship has not overcome their lives. The group discovered that what the people truly wanted was to tell their stories to the world and to ensure the tragedy is never forgotten. A camera crew accompanied the group and is in the process of creating a documentary. A preliminary video can be seen at: . To further support the organization and their Beslan Projects, a Peacemaker bracelet is available in many different languages (see website for details).

During Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov's visit to China in November of 2005, the Chinese Health Ministry announced that they were sending doctors to Beslan, and offered free medical care to any of the victims who still needed treatment.

Films

Children of Beslan (2005). Produced and directed by Ewa Ewart and Leslie Woodhead. HBO Documentary Films and BBC co-production.