The Beslan Hostage Crisis: A Case Study for Emergency Responders

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Although school violence has been a topic of substantial research and analysis, the potential of a mass hostage crisis in a school setting is still a relatively rarefied topic in the literature. Recent incidents such as the Virginia Tech shooting have been perpetrated by single shooters. Well-trained, multiple shooters present a range of substantially different problems for responders, which require serious consideration in all emergency planning. This article uses the 2004 school attack in Beslan, which resulted in over 300 deaths, as a case study for emergency responders at all levels. The article provides policy recommendations specific to schools, first responders, and city emergency management planners.

KEYWORDS School violence, school safety, Beslan, mass hostage taking

Planning for school violence has become an increasingly important concern for school districts and first responders. Since the Columbine high school shooting in 1999, schools nationwide have faced a range of threats from the DC Sniper to the Nickel Mines, PA hostage incident, in addition to the day to day school violence associated with bullying, gangs, and other factors. In 2004, the National Center for Education Statistics released a report analyzing school deaths during the period of July 1, 1999, through June 30, 2000. They found 32 violent deaths in schools, eight of which were suicides. While the report used critical quantitative analysis to bring these important statistics to

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light, it did not address the potential of violence in a school setting due to terrorism. In fact, this is difficult to do because there are so few incidents to analyze.

Since the attacks at Columbine and, most recently, Virginia Tech, school officials and local first responders have begun to plan for prevention and response to so-called active shooter incidents. In September 2007, the State of New Jersey issued a report that clarified policies for rapid response and lockdown in response to an active shooter. Even this report focuses primarily on acts of violence that may be caused by disgruntled or disturbed students (such as at Columbine and Virginia Tech). Although grounded in past experience, this focus on student violence again fails to take the threat of terrorism against schools, from external actors, into account.

These plans, although an important first step, cannot fully prepare schools, first responders, and the nation to respond to a mass hostage event such as occurred in Beslan, Ossetia, at the hands of Chechen terrorists. In September 2004, the world watched in horror as terrorists attacked and held hostage a school, including young students, parents, and teachers, on the first day of the school year, ultimately causing 338 deaths.

Even though these attacks have not, to date, been replicated outside of the region, it is important for homeland security professionals to study the tactics of the Chechen terrorists. These “spectacular” attacks on innocent children are like nothing the United States has previously confronted. They are distinct in nature and outcome from both other acts of school violence such as Columbine, and other large-scale terror attacks such as upon the World Trade Center on 9/11.

Recent research on a nationally representative sample of 2,500 Americans indicated that the anticipated magnitude of psychological distress associated with a malevolent intent toward children, particularly, hostage-taking, dwarfed all other terrorist threats and natural disasters. In addition, the specificity of the research questions used made it possible to distinguish children as victims (i.e., collateral damage) versus children as targets of terrorism. It was clear that it was the intentional targeting of children that accounted for the magnitude of psychological distress. In a separate study of national reactions to the Virginia Tech killings, a sizeable majority of Americans reported that they believed it likely that a “terrorist” would imitate the methods of Virginia Tech by attacking the United States in a similar fashion sometime during the next three years (Breckenridge, 2008). Whereas other methods of terrorism, such as traditional suicide bombing, can kill in the range of 5 to 50 people, depending on the methods used, the single variable used uniquely by the Chechen terrorists of taking hostage large groups of people can potentially lead to deaths in the hundreds per incident.
Mass hostage-taking in schools is an extremely rare event. Prior to the Beslan attack, the only large-scale school-based mass hostage situation occurred in Israel, where in 1975 three terrorists from the Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine took 90 students hostage in a school building in the town of Ma'alot. When Israeli security forces rushed the school, twenty children were killed along with the three terrorists and one Israeli soldier (Jenkins et al., 1977).

Unlike traditional school shootings perpetrated by a student, which are themselves rare, mass hostage events in schools do not provide sufficient data points from which to develop quantitative or qualitative measures that can help identify perpetrators or specific risk mitigation strategies. In one of the earliest comprehensive studies of international hostage events, Jenkins and his colleagues warned that policy makers and analysts cannot draw statistical inferences from such a small subset of data. As a result, the case study method is a most useful tool for understanding the policy implications of such a potential attack in the United States. This article utilizes the descriptive case study method in order to explore the questions of how and why the Beslan attack occurred, and its implications for schools, first responders, and city Office of Emergency Management (OEM) planners.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHECHEN TERRORIST TACTICS

The conflict between the Russians and Chechens is a history of warfare stretching back to the 19th century. The fall and dissolution of the Soviet Union only served to heighten historical tensions as the 21st century began.

Russian troops entered Chechnya in December 1994 to prevent the region's attempt to secede from the Russian Federation. Tens of thousands of civilians were killed and an estimated 500,000 were displaced. Following years of rebellion, on May 9, 2004, as Akhmad Kadyrov, the newly elected president, watched a Victory Day parade in Grozny, a huge explosion ripped through the stadium, killing the president. Shamil Basayev, a Chechen rebel leader, quickly claimed credit for the attack. The explosives had been implanted within the infrastructure of the stadium itself, during the construction phase, months before. This type of methodical advance planning is one hallmark of Chechen-style attacks that was also used in the Beslan school attack.

The tactic of mass hostage-taking in Chechnya developed during the period of rebellion after 1994. Basayev and his group, the Riyadus-Salikhin Reconnaissance and Sabotage Battalion of Chechen Martyrs (RSRSBCM) claimed responsibility for the seizure of the Budyonnovsk Hospital in 1995, taking 2,000 hostages; the holding of 3,000 hostages at a hospital in Kizlyar in 1986; and the 2002 Dubrovka theater hostage-taking event (Dunlop, 2006).
The Russian response in each case was one of blunt military force. It is clear that the terrorists anticipated the Russian reaction—for example, a refusal to negotiate and an unwillingness to take quick, decisive military action out of concern for the hostages inside (Ekaterina, 2004). Nearly 120 people died in a firefight eight days after Chechen rebels took over the hospital in the town of Budyonnovsk, after which the Moscow News commented that “Saturday, June 17 [1995] will go down in the annals of the struggle against terrorism as a day of folly, unprofessionalism of the military and the complete idiocy of their superiors” (Finch, 1997). The next year, Moscow had to respond with tanks when Chechen rebels seized the entire town of 2,000 people in Dagestan.

In October 2002, 40 Chechen terrorists, possibly led by an Arab, seized 979 hostages in the Dubrovka theater. Like the Beslan attack to follow, the Chechens carried out a series of bombings prior to the hostage-taking and apparently used females with “martyr belts” as part of their armament (Reuter, 2004, p. 13), and in neither case would governmental officials with the security forces or the Putin administration negotiate, choosing instead to prepare Special Forces (spetsnaz) for the recapture of the facility (Dunlop, 2006). They waited for 5 days before deploying the fentanyl gas that disabled the hostage-takers and killed 127 of the hostages (Donahoe, 2003).

**BESLAN**

On September 1, 2004, approximately 32 armed terrorists stormed a school in Beslan, Russia and took over 1,200 children, parents, teachers, and others hostage in one of most dramatic and prolonged terrorist events in recent history. The hostage standoff lasted three full days. When the spetsnaz stormed the school, the security cordon was breached by relatives, many of them armed, who mingled with the troops running toward the buildings. After protracted negotiations, spetsnaz stormed the gym. According to the prosecutor’s office, one of the bombs was accidentally detonated and gunfire was heard in the gym (Marcus, 2004).

The forces’ attacks came from several sides at once, resulting in further confusion and fratricide. Russian media also reported that, as the roof threatened to collapse during the assault, Russian troops began to fire on the gymnasium. The terrorists herded the remaining hostages into the cafeteria and placed women with white school blouses or curtains in the windows. They were told to yell, “Don’t shoot!” but the survivors recounted that they could not be heard over the noise of the attack. Russian spetsnaz still fired on the gymnasium, resulting in further deaths of the hostages. Fire and emergency medical personnel were not poised nearby to respond, but were, presumably, at the Hostage Negotiation Headquarters downtown. The responders required over 40 minutes to reach the school and another
40 minutes to prepare to address the fire. Part of the delay was due to congestion of emergency, military, and civilian vehicles, and of townspeople, armed and otherwise, attempting to self-rescue and self-evacuate the wounded. Reports indicate that the fire was first reported at 1:05 p.m. but that the fire engines were not even ordered to respond until 3:20 p.m. At least three armored personnel carriers and military helicopters were used as weapons platforms, a means of fire projection wholly inconsistent with a civilian hostage situation. Civilian witnesses said that tank fire, flamethrowers, and rocket-propelled grenades were used by the Russian forces during the attack, a charge the Russians repeatedly denied (Lukov, 2005). In 2005 Russia’s prosecutor general admitted such equipment had been used, but only after all the children had left the school (BBC News, 2005).

In the end, 338 individuals were killed, including 159 children.

ANALYSIS OF CHECHEN TACTICS AT BESLAN

The Chechen terrorists at Beslan displayed the zealous ardor of the suicide bombers used so effectively by Al Qaeda and Hamas. The hostages were herded into a small gymnasium. Numerous mines and bombs connected by cables were deployed across the floor. Explosive devices were also taped to the walls, suspended from the ceiling, and two larger devices were placed in the basketball hoops. Twenty male hostages were executed early in the siege and the attackers would intermittently fire their weapons to intimidate the hostages, government forces, civilians, and negotiators. They placed children along the windows to act as human shields. The terrorists also demanded specific individuals with whom they wished to negotiate. Their demands included the removal of Russian troops from Chechnya and the release of recently captured Ingushetians. In retrospect, it is obvious that the terrorists never expected their demands to be met (Marcus, 2004; Dolnik, 2007).

They released 26 hostages on the second day, Thursday, but refused to allow food or water supplies into the school, which was surrounded by Special Forces. Contact with the hostage-takers was resumed on Friday morning. At about 0850 GMT they agreed to let emergency workers inside to retrieve the bodies of hostages who had been killed when the school was seized (BBC News, 2004). At 0900, shots and explosions were heard, and some hostages managed to escape. It is believed that the terrorist holding the detonator was shot by Special Forces disguised among the emergency workers. Other terrorists then detonated other placed explosives, collapsing the roof of the gymnasium.

The placing of explosives around the gymnasium was quickly revealed to be intended as more than a negotiating tool, as the roof of the gymnasium was blown almost immediately after the shooting started. This action suggests that they always intended to martyr some of the terrorists and that
the terrorists intended to effect the maximum psychological effect upon the international community by the slaughter of innocent children. The intentional targeting of innocents and the self-martyrdom are both earmarks of Islamist suicide bombers, and a far cry from the early hostage seizures by Basayev's forces where a specific nationalist goal was espoused in return for the hostages' release.

**ANALYSIS OF RUSSIAN REACTION**

Premier Putin, typically, vowed revenge after Beslan, and reportedly stated, "We exhibited weakness, and the weak are beaten" (Lynch, 2005, p. 153). There are a number of easily identifiable failings in the Russian security structure. First, there seem to have been too many different security forces, too many agencies with their own firepower, and the use of paramilitary or military forces. This multiplicity of forces led to innumerable problems including vague or non existent command and control relationships, a lack of jointness of forces at Beslan, and poor communications.

The counterterrorist operations were deficient on many levels, almost assuring failure. Russian forces failed to establish clear and secure perimeters within which the conflict could be contained. The escape of some of the terrorists through the cordon should have been impossible. The operation appeared to lack co-ordination, as the command, control, and communications among all the forces, military and quasi-military, was lacking. Civilians, both unarmed and some with automatic weapons were, unbelievably, permitted within the tactical zone surrounding the school. Medical facilities on the scene appeared to be inadequate.

Contingency planning for an assault should have involved more than simply tactical familiarization with the area of operations. The heat and the overall condition of the young and weak hostages meant that the standoff could not be allowed to drag on for days. A well-trained military or preferably law enforcement assault force trained and experienced in civilian "shoot/don't shoot" scenarios was required. The force would need the capability to respond quickly, if negotiations failed suddenly or if the terrorists otherwise acted violently.

**THE CONNECTION TO AL QAEDA**

While Chechnya has always been predominantly Muslim, with fervid nationalist yearnings, the cycle of oppression and retaliation between the groups, together with the accessibility of supplies, funds, and fighters from Arab states, made the RSRSBCM seek the support of other Muslim fighters, and concurrently caused other Muslim terrorists to seek opportunities to fight
in Chechnya (Moroney and Karasik in *Ungoverned Territories*, 2007). The Minister of Culture in neighboring Kabardino-Balkaria said, after the Beslan attack, “...what happened in Beslan was not about nationalism, I think it had the character of religious extremism. The terrorists did not belong to any ethnic group. They were bound by a religious idea” (Whewell, 2004). Not all the terrorists were Chechen, and Basayev had known connections to Al Qaeda, and was seeking financial and ideological support from radical Islamists. Galeotti (2004) contends that the trend toward Islamic justification for Chechen terror activity may simply be the paucity of remaining options: “[The Islamist terrorists] continued, perhaps growing appeal, lies in the failure of the present rebel campaign. ... The extremists can promise not only the spiritual solace of paradise to those martyr fighting the Russians, they also offer the more immediate and primitive prospects of revenge,” p. 15.

It has been known for years that Muslim volunteers have traveled to Chechnya to join the fighting, reportedly after attending training camps in Afghanistan or Pakistan. One of the main field commanders, until his death in 2002 at the hands of Russian forces, was a Jordanian called Khattab—a veteran of the Afghan mujahideen war against the U.S.S.R. “In Chechnya, Khattab was made operations chief under the overall commander, Shamal Basayev. Like Khattab, Basayev had trained in al Qaeda camps and was personally close to bin Laden” (Riebling and Eddy, 2002).

Intercepted telephone calls also led U.S. officials to allege in 2002 that fighters in Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge, near the border with Chechnya, were in contact with Al Qaeda. In October of that year, the Georgians captured 15 Arab militants in the Pankisi Gorge and remanded them to U.S. custody. Among those reportedly turned over was one of Laden’s top operatives—military expert and instructor Saif al Islam al Masry (Riebling and Eddy, 2002).

### POTENTIAL FOR A CHECHEN-STYLE AL QAEDA ATTACK IN THE UNITED STATES

Suleiman Abu Gaith, senior advisor to bin Laden and Al Qaeda spokesperson, stated their position on targeting children when he said, “We have not reached parity with [America]. We have the right to kill four million Americans, two million of them children, and to exile twice as many and wound and cripple hundreds of thousands” (Redlener, 2006, p. 113).

Similarly, a desktop computer recovered by U.S. journalists that had been used mostly by Ayman al-Zawahiri in the Kabul office of al Qaeda contained a similar rationale for targeting women and children. Ramzi bin al-Shibh, the senior Yemeni operative who coordinated with Khalid Sheikh Muhammad in masterminding the attacks, used the computer to work on
a hasty and unfinished ideological justification for the operation, which he
titled “The Truth About the New Crusade: A Ruling on the Killing of Women
and Children of the Non-Believers,” excerpts of which follow:

Concerning the operations of the blessed Tuesday [9/11] ... they are
legally legitimate, because they are committed against a country at war
with us, and the people in that country are combatants. Someone might
say that it is the innocent, the elderly, the women, and the children
who are victims, so how can these operations be legitimate according to
sharia? And we say that the sanctity of women, children, and the elderly
is not absolute. There are special cases ... Muslims may respond in kind
if infidels have targeted women and children and elderly Muslims, [or if]
they are being invaded, [or if] the non-combatants are helping with the
fight, whether in action, word, or any other type of assistance, [or if they]
need to attack with heavy weapons, which do not differentiate between
combatants and non-combatants. Now that we know that the operations
were permissible from the Islamic point of view, we must answer or
respond to those who prohibit the operations from the point of view of
benefits or harms. (Cullison, 2004, pp. 58-59)

Despite the dismantling of the formal structure that led to the planning for
9/11, some analysts (RAND Corporation, 2007) suggest that the destruction
of bin Laden's network has actually empowered smaller, less predictable
organizations to take up the call to global jihad. It is not clear if Al Qaeda
retains enough control over these groups to be able to direct their targeting
in ways consistent with Al Qaeda's stated goals. This creates a great concern
because, as the researchers state, “With the possible exception of the attack
on the Taba Hilton in October 2004, every terrorist attack since late 2002
associated with al Qaeda has been either by a 'franchised' or 'unaffiliated'
group. If this pattern continues, then the terrorism risk to the United States
may be limited to jihadists organized and operating within the country,”
p. 70. They state further that “franchises,” with fewer resources, will resort
to different types of attacks, including the relatively inexpensive mode of
hostage-taking.

THE SELECTION OF TARGETS

Sandra Bell (2005) writes for the Royal United Institute for Defence and
Security Studies that “the hostage takers only aim was to capture the world's
attention for as long as possible by committing an act of total revulsion
against humanities' most vulnerable, most precious—innocent children.” In
support of this theory, Bell points out that the sheer number of hostages
and the number of children would inevitably garner international attention,
and that the terrorists indicated that they intended to die for this attention by
refusing to accept food, water, and medicine for the hostages (which would
The use of children coupled with the media's coverage of the situation acted as a particularly violent and effective force multiplier for their message of Chechen liberation and violent Islamicism.

The RAND Corporation (Libicki et al., 2007) recently conducted an analysis on the selection of targets by terrorists, particularly Al Qaeda. Based on public statements made by Al Qaeda, they derive four hypotheses of what drives terrorist targeting preferences: Coercion, Damage, Rally, and Franchise. This lays out an interesting framework for evaluating the possibility of a mass hostage-taking at a school in the United States. The Coercion hypothesis, positing that attacks will take place in such a manner as to inflict pain on U.S. citizens that will prompt them to urge the government to pull out of Muslim nations, seems the most likely for this scenario. Soft targets such as schools become more attractive under this hypothesis, particularly because other targets such as government and military installations have become hardened since 9/11, and therefore more difficult to successfully attack. Similarly, the Rally hypothesis posits that targets are chosen primarily for the purpose of proving the strength of the jihadist movement, so as to attract more followers. The use of martyrs, such as those who were willing to die at Beslan, is a notably successful feature of this approach. Even if Al Qaeda does not participate in the planning of such attacks, inspired groups may use the relatively inexpensive method of taking hostages at the soft target of a school to either Coerce or Rally, much as Al Qaeda would.

**SCHOOLS IN THE UNITED STATES: POTENTIAL THREATS AND CURRENT STATE OF PREPAREDNESS**

The Moscow theater and Beslan School #1 could be compared to the events of 9/11. Besides the Chechen–Al Qaeda connection, there are similarities in methods and targeting. They were all attempts at “spectaculars” to sow fear among the citizenry on a large or massive scale. Mass hostage-taking, on a scale unseen elsewhere, with thousands of hostages seized by a relative handful of terrorists, fits the definition of “spectaculars” (Galcotti, 2004) used by Al Qaeda and others. The lengthy and detailed planning, the boldness of the attack in execution, the dispassionate savagery in intentionally targeting young and helpless civilians, and the potential for large loss of life and for psychological impact on society are near identical in all the attacks. “By the scope it can only be compared to the tragedy in New York,” liberal lawmaker Boris Nemtsov said on Russian television at the time of the Moscow attack (Riebling and Eddy, 2002).

The sheer size and scope of the issue compels the need for immediate consideration. There are 47,687,871 elementary and secondary students in
the United States in 2003. In 2004, that number had risen slightly to 48,354,000 students. These students were taught in 95,726 separate school buildings (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). New York City alone has 1,400 schools. Given the previous interest of international terrorists in New York City, one could describe the area as a “target rich” environment for terrorists bent on “spectaculars.”

Irwin Redlener, Director of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University, points to the following events as evidence that children could be the direct target of an attack here in the United States:

- “An attack by Al Qaeda, planned for the American School in Singapore, was prevented at “the last moment” by U.S. and Singaporean counterintelligence teams;
- The Al Qaeda faction responsible for the Bali nightclub attacks had plans to attack U.S. and Western children attending schools in Indonesia;
- During a search of the home of an insurgent in Baghdad, U.S. forces discovered a computer disk with maps and details for schools in Michigan, California, Oregon, Florida, and other states” (Redlener, 2006, p. 112).

School nurses nationwide say they need to be more prepared for terrorist attacks. Nearly half the nurses who responded to a National Association of School Nurses survey listed emergency preparedness as their highest priority (Dychkowski, 2005). But, disaster preparedness trainer Deborah Strouse noted that many schools do not even have a full-time nurse or health services. Many are trying to work around tight school budgets and a lack of respect as front-line responders to get the training needed to prepare for the worst. "They're really on the front line before even the EMT person gets there," said Wanda Miller, executive director of the school nurses association. "They are the person that has to react, has to be prepared and must have some kind of plan in place to manage the situations that occur." Many schools developed disaster plans following the Columbine school shootings in 1999 or the September 11, 2001, terror attacks. Yet, they do not have the funding to train administrators and teachers on how to carry out the plans, said Julie Underwood, general counsel for the National School Boards Association (Milicia, 2005).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Stunned by the attack at Beslan, Russia made a number of changes to improve prevention and mitigation of future attacks, particularly in the region of Chechnya. One of the most important lessons learned was the need for stronger local control and decision-making authority, which Russia has implemented haltingly. As Soldatov and Borogan (2005) point out, however,
such a system is already in place in the United States, where local law
enforcement and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) are responsible
for such incidents.

The United States cannot ever adequately guard every school building
sufficiently to preclude a terror attack. The steps taken by the schools and by
local first responders to prevent lone gunman attacks, however, will go far
toward prevention of terror attacks. The following steps should be seriously
considered.

Schools

1. Every school building should have a terror response plan, including
   training for all school personnel on student safety. The plan should
   include (a) multiple means to communicate with local law enforcement
   and first responders; (b) plans to isolate students and interdict gunmen,
   including locking off hallways behind steel fire doors; and (c) plans
   to interdict parents and cordon the school for their safety and the free
   movement of first responders (Nichol, 2004). The risk/vulnerability
   assessment conducted at the beginning of the planning process should
   not just look inward at threats such as school bullying (United States
   Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education, 2002) but also outward,
   toward external threats such as the possibility of transnational terrorism
   taking place in a school setting.

2. Just as students practiced “duck and cover” during the Civil Defense days
   of the Cold War, so should students and teachers actively practice “lock
   and hide” and evacuation drills during the Global War on Terror (GWOT).
   Schools may need to be incentivized as they were during the Cold War
to participate in such training events. New Jersey’s plan, discussed earlier,
presents one example of how this may be implemented in the active
shooter context.

3. School terror response plan should be exercised annually with not just
   all school personnel, but students, parents, law enforcement, fire, Emer­
   gency Medical Service (EMS), and city officials (Nichol, 2004). Every school
   should have at least one table top exercise with all staff and with the local
   first responders before the start of each school year.

Police, Fire, and EMS

1. Joint training still is, and always will be, an ongoing requirement for all
   agencies that will have to work together in response to an event. Mem­
   bers of response teams will change, new equipment or technologies will
   be developed, new school buildings will be used; whatever the changing
   circumstance, it will necessitate the need for re-training. And, of course,
   continuous training is needed just to remain sharp and fully prepared
   for an event. Emergency medical personnel are responsible for treating
any Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD), Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team, or other law enforcement casualties. Generally, EMS personnel are not armed or trained in evaluation of a criminal scene. EMS providers also need to have rapid and safe access to civilian victims who require medical attention. Communities who employ SWAT teams should consider the incorporation of tactical emergency medical support (TEMS) personnel onto the team. This should be considered carefully, as SWAT operations are complex, evolving, volatile events that require continuous team training.

2. Coordinated training should extend to fire units as well, and include the establishment of (1) Incident Command System; (2) common communications equipment and channels; and (3) if possible, a standard template for staging or location of units and equipment. Training fire department personnel (particularly hazardous materials technicians, paramedics, EOD personnel, or drivers) to understand how the mission and tactics of special law enforcement units (such as SWAT teams or riot police) may impact special fire/EMS operations is important. Again, this is best accomplished through joint planning and training between law enforcement and fire and EMS services. Operational procedures should be documented and distributed to all involved personnel.

The Beslan incident demonstrates that military forces should always act in support of law enforcement, rather than in charge of, a domestic incident. As early as 1977, Jenkins and colleagues identified the threat of death to hostages from the actions of security forces intended to help them. This is a critical area of concern. The rules of engagement engrained into both police and military from their earliest training and throughout their careers is starkly different: Police are trained to only use the minimum amount of force necessary to effect the arrest or to defend themselves or another, whereas the military are trained to apply overwhelming force to defeat the enemy as quickly as possible.

Certainly, the response in the Beslan and Columbine schools could not be more different: in Beslan, the spetsnaz used helicopter gunships and tanks, without regard to the hostages' welfare, whereas in Columbine the SWAT team was criticized for acting too slowly, as they were hindered by the inability to discern the student-gunmen from the student-victims.

3. Police officer training, particularly for School and Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) officers, should include the ability to quickly discern whether they are faced with an "active shooter" like Columbine, or a hostage situation. The police response needed is very different. With an active shooter in the school building, police officers should enter as early as possible to prevent further injury to students and staff. Law enforcement does not have the luxury of obtaining the best intelligence, a full complement of SWAT officers, or a robust contingency entry plan. Thus, the earliest possible identification of the incident as an active shooter or a
hostage-taking will provide a few more precious minutes of preparation for the responding forces.

4. Combined and ad hoc Response Teams. Given the inherent volatility of such a dynamic event, officers greatly prefer a forced entry team composed of trusted team members. But in an active shooter scenario, that may be an unaffordable luxury. SWAT officers from neighboring jurisdictions should cross-train, and similarly, train with non-officers that may be needed in a school scenario, such as EMS and bomb disposal technicians.

The Beslan scenario brings to light numerous other issues. In Beslan, there was neither sufficient nor interoperable communications, nor was there unity of effort or unity of response. Neither the planning nor the rescue was coordinated by the assaulting forces, nor does it appear that operational activities were coordinated between the North Ossetians and the Putin administration. The National Incident Management System (NIMS) now required in the United States was clearly needed in Beslan. Beslan also clarifies the need for strong perimeter control, as the lack of cordoned lanes for response efforts resulted in a chaotic rescue effort and undoubtedly contributed to the death toll. The rescuers’ efforts were hampered by armed and unarmed civilians. The possibility that a few of the terrorists may have escaped is inexcusable, but directly caused by the lack of a secure perimeter. The inability of the fire and EMS to reach the wounded was, again, directly attributable to the failure to maintain the perimeter.

Schools must be continuously recognized as critical infrastructure in state homeland security preparedness planning. Plans for each school building cannot fully prepare schools, first responders, states, and cities to respond to a mass hostage event such as occurred in Beslan, Ossetia. As rare as it may be, the need to be fully prepared for such a potential event is critical.

NOTES

1. In 2006, Basayev was killed in a massive, if mysterious, explosion in Ingushetia. The explosion occurred a week before the G8 leaders summit hosted by Russia in St. Petersburg, and was seen as a coup for Putin.

2. The RSRBCh was officially designated as a terror group by the U.S. Department of State in 2003. U.S. Department of State (2003). Designation of Shamil Basayev under Executive Order 13224. Washington, DC.

3. Where the response required by first responders differs between “active shooter” events and mass hostage events, those distinctions are noted later in the article.

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