

Under fire – school siege in Beslan

Operational co-ordination and an apparently disastrous breakdown in multi-agency liaison are just two of the aspects of the Beslan siege that are being closely scrutinised by a special commission set up by Vladimir Putin in Russia. **Will Stewart** describes the other extreme factors that hampered Fire Service Operations

RUSSIA IS CONDUCTING a detailed analysis into the response of its emergency services to terrorist incidents following the Beslan school siege tragedy earlier this year in which at least 340 people – nearly half of them children – were killed and hundreds more were injured.

The probe is likely to lead to wide-ranging recommendations concerning operational issues at future outrages, *Crisis Response Journal* has been told.

A special commission is examining in detail the response of the Fire Service in Beslan to coincide with a more general shake-up ordered by leader Vladimir Putin to protect the country from future outrages and to cope more effectively when they arise.

Extreme crisis

Concerning Beslan, there is a widespread recognition of the chronic difficulties faced by the local Fire Service in coping with an extreme crisis after terrorists advocating Chechen independence stormed a school in the North Ossetian town.

There is also praise for the exceptional bravery shown by dozens of local firefighters who, without adequate protection and equipment, fought the blaze caused by bomb explosions even as shooting was continuing between terrorists and Russian troops.

“There were heroes among the firemen who ignored the enormous threat to their lives by seeking to extinguish the blaze so the children, parents and teachers in the school could be saved,” said a senior security source.

However, the commission is likely to highlight concerns over a number of aspects, understands *Crisis Response Journal*. Some may be aired publicly, other lessons will be learned without being discussed in the media, since the security



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and emergency services do not want to play into the hands of terrorists.

Some of the issues revolve around operational co-ordination in what was a multi-agency response led by local commanders of the Federal Security Service, the FSB, formerly known as the KGB. There is evidence that local Fire Chiefs believe their crews should have been called in sooner, and that they could have saved significantly more lives as a result.

Against this, local FSB commanders have privately pointed to the extreme danger in the school as the siege suddenly ended in a storm of explosions and shooting.

Frustrations

Officially sanctioned negotiators were seeking dialogue with the captors, who took more than 1,000 hostages, when “the whole thing went up in flames”, as one local senior fire officer put it.

“Someone had to make a decision about when to bring in the firemen – in any

terrorist horror like this, it is going to be a snap judgement, and it will be easy to criticise with the benefit of hindsight,” said the security source.

But Khadzi Dzgiyev, Chief of 6th Beslan Fire Brigade, revealed: “For quite a long time we were not allowed to get close to the school. The FSB officers wouldn’t let us. They said that it was not quite the right moment for us to go in.

“We were keen to get in there. My brigade consists mainly of guys in their mid-20s. They are all from Beslan. All of them had either a friend or relative inside the school. They were desperate to get in there.

“So to see the school in flames, and us unable to get in and fight the fire, was a torture.” Senior officers now examining the events admit that it was a fast-moving crisis in which mistakes were almost inevitable.

However, these errors were compounded by a problem afflicting many developing nations, namely the poor state of equipment and lack of protective clothing.

“We started to shout and scream at the FSB people – and in the end they let us go in,” said Dzgiyev, “They could see by then we could make a difference, and were ready to take the risks.

“I had 44 men with me, who rushed into that hell without any protection from the bullets. Most of them didn’t even have helmets.” As they went in, one of the fire appliances broke down, literally blocking the way to other engines trying to get into position. A local journalist on the scene, Murat Kaboyev, said: “One of the appliances just stopped in the middle of the yard and we all had to manually pull it away so that engines could get closer. They lost so much time on that. It was full to the brim with water – and we could hardly shift



it away. Their appliances are so old they fall apart just when you touch them.”

“The motor just died,” according to Dzgiyev. “It happened when we were just about to start extinguishing. Frankly our appliances are so ancient that it was a miracle that in the end the rest of them worked.”

He stressed: “Bullets were flying and certainly we were not prepared for the situation of extinguishing fire on a battlefield, which was what we were confronted with.

“Neither me nor my firefighters knew how to behave in this context but, to be honest, we didn’t even try to build any kind of plan. We heard the kids’ crying and it was all we could think about.

Cries for help

“We also knew that one of our boys was captured there. So we really didn’t think about anything, we didn’t realise that each moment we may be shot dead. We just wanted to do our work.

“I still remember very clearly those chilling cries for help around us. And the dreadful moment when we entered the gym, full of the charred bodies of the children and their mothers and teachers.”

With troops seeking to cover them, the unarmed firefighters rushed to force or smash open windows in the school, to help the children

flee but also to let the smoke escape. They used hoses where they could to attack flames, though the “escaping children meant we had to be careful”.

Viktor Kharkov, the Chief of Pravoberezhnyi district firefighting department of Beslan, said: “We are really surprised that none of our men were killed during the operation. To let the smoke out we had to open all the windows, so each firefighter was directly visible to the terrorist snipers who were shooting at anything that moved.”

The captured firefighter Aslanbek Beroyev, 24, had been seized by the terrorists at the beginning of the siege, when he was at the school with relatives.

It was later revealed that he was shot dead by his captors early in the siege.

Shortcomings

In the cold light of day, as the commission sifts through the detailed picture of the response, the shortcomings are already clear.

It is hard to point the finger of blame at the local firefighters who showed such bravery, all the more because, in many cases, these were men who had not only endured two sleepless nights on standby, but also worrying about relatives and friends inside the school. “Psychologically, none of us was ready for this operation,” acknowledged Dzgiyev. “Never before did we have any tactical exercises for this kind of scenario.

“Had we done so, it would have been so much easier for us to know how to behave, how to organise the process, where to go first. Unfortunately we start thinking about things like that only after they happen. “

In the wake of the horror, it seems the state has acknowledged the need for modernising equipment as well as training.

Yet for Russia – clearly now a potential target for pro-Chechen militants and terrorists linked to al Qaeda and other international rings – the task is enormous. “The terrorists seem to glory in these major atrocities – we have seen the attack on the Nord Ost theatre in Moscow two years ago,” said the security source. “Overnight it is simply not possible to modernise the response units and make the necessary changes. But we will do our best.”

Dzgiyev stressed: “Now in Beslan we plan to change all our vehicles to more modern, reliable models. We’re thinking how to organise tactical training exercise for officers.

“In this regard, we would very much like to have the chance to exchange experience and expertise with fire officers from other countries who have had to deal with this kind of situation.”

Dzgiyev said that three of his officers remain in hospital “shell-shocked by what they saw and

experienced on that fateful day. I myself, being 47 years old, still can't sleep properly at night. I see that awful carnage in the school gym in my nightmares. I am not alone in this. We all need rehabilitation as none of us hardened firefighters has been to such a hell before."

Many, though, are not getting the counselling and psychological help that they require.

Local people – heavily bereaved by the tragedy – have voiced criticism of the "slow response" of the Fire Service. Similar criticism has been made of the ambulance service.

"In fact the firefighters did their jobs very quickly but they arrived on the scene too late," said Kaboyev. "By then, a third of the victims had lost consciousness in the choking smoke and died. But we don't believe the firefighters were to blame for this. They were stopped by the FSB and military and couldn't get through earlier.

"When they did get there, they really behaved heroically, ignoring the bullets and rushing straight into the middle of the battle."

Officially, the Emergency Services Ministry, which controls the Russian Fire Service, will not be drawn on the details of the lessons from Beslan.

Public concern

But official Andrei Yegorov told Crisis Response Journal: "What I can say now is that the FSB approved the Beslan fire operation as it unfolded. It is, though, too early to draw specific conclusions because it is only recently that Alexander Zhuk, Chief of the State Fire Fighting Service, went down to Beslan to participate in the work of the commission, which will fully analyse the matter."

He added: "We know that locals were not happy with the firefighters and blame them for coming too late. But we all know what kind of crisis it was, and how emotional people are still after losing loved ones. I want to stress, the FSB did not complain about the firefighters' response." He expected the results of the commission to be known soon but did not rule out changes to training and inter-agency communications to deal with future incidents.

The FSB has not responded to the specific criticisms that the Fire Service was blocked from tackling the blaze sooner. But the security service is known to see the need for close and strong co-ordination in any future crisis. The point was highlighted by Valeri Manolov, an advisor to the Federation Council, the upper chamber of the Russian Parliament: "Beslan showed that there is an inadmissible dislocation between our security (and emergency) services," he said. "Often they impede each other during the operations. Actually we should have learned those lessons from the

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Nord Ost theatre siege but we still repeat the mistakes."

FSB director Nikolai Patrushev has also signalled his desire to learn from the experiences of others. "Acts of terror these days take place not only in Russia but all over the world," he said. "We're not the only ones to face terrorists' threat. That's why the first thing we should do is to compare what we do in Russia with what's being done abroad."

Putin, meanwhile, has staged a shake-up within the Russian Government, with the intention of centralising command over the response to ter-

rorism and the prevention of such atrocities. This involves beefing up an FSB section for dealing with terrorism as well as political changes, some of them controversial, aimed at giving the Kremlin more sway in the regions.

So far it is the police service that has suffered the main blame for lapses leading to the terrorist attack. On October 27, prosecutors charged three senior police officials with negligence over the Beslan school hostage taking. Prosecutor Nikolai Shepel said that the three police officers "should have discovered" the hostage-takers' plans but failed to do so.

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