

Learning from mass hostage events

Lina Kolesnikova writes about lessons learned from mass hostage takings in Russia and how preparedness for, and response to, such sieges can be improved

ONE OF THE most terrifying examples of modern terrorism is the practice of mass hostage takings. There have been four mass hostage takings in modern Russian history:

- 1995 – a group carried out a raid into the Russian town Budenovsk (Stavropol). Around 2,000 hostages were taken; there were 83 fatalities, including 60 hostages and three members of the military;
- 1996 – Three thousand hostages were seized at a hospital in Kizlyar (Dagestan). Seventy-three people died: seven police; 40 hostages and civilians; and 26 military personnel;
- 2002 – More than 900 hostages were taken in Moscow's Dubrovka theatre. One 129 hostages were killed; and
- 2004 – A group seized over 1,300 schoolchildren and their parents in Beslan (North Ossetia); 331 people died: 318 hostages, 168 of them children.

Recent events

In this article, I concentrate on two of the most recent mass hostage takings – the Nord-Ost theatre and Beslan school.

Figure 1 outlines the common framework for the Nord-Ost incident. 'Pre-phase' is what takes place before the terrorist attack. This phase includes all other activities occurring before the 'hot phase'. The hot phase is when Special Forces intervene to neutralise the terrorists and to prepare acceptable conditions for rescue services' activities. The 'cold phase' begins when rescue services enter the site and begin to evacuate the hostages.

Colours are used to indicate whether the sub-process and its input and output are of sufficient quality. Green indicates successful actions and adequate information. Yellow indicates partially successful actions or fragmented information. Red is used to denote failed actions or insufficient or missing information.

On October 23, 2002, 41 terrorists took more

than 900 hostages at the Nord-Ost theatre. After three days of negotiation, an assault was launched. The death toll was 129, with most of the hostages dying during the cold phase of the rescue operation.

While the critical hot phase of the operation was well prepared and successful (no hostages or operators were shot), the overall operation was deemed a failure because of the high death toll.

Major failure

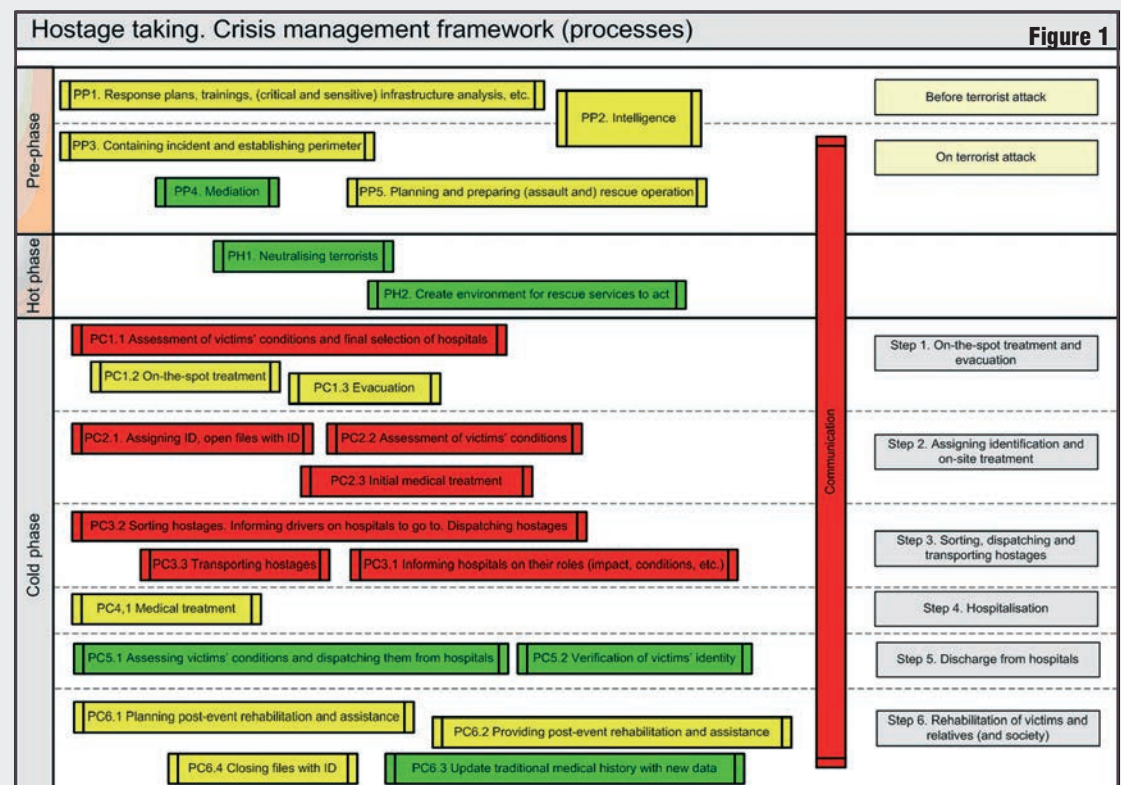
From Figure 1, it is clear that the major failure occurred in information disclosure and dispatch, during the transition from the hot to the cold phase of the operation.

Because of a lack of communication, rescue teams on the site (as well as personnel at hospitals) were unaware of the impact of the incident and what kind of treatment was required.

Subsequently, they failed to provide adequate on-site treatment.

Lessons learned included:

- The successful military part of the operation was followed by overall failure and a massive loss of life owing to the lack of central operation command, communication and co-ordination;
- Leadership/command of the whole operation should be clearly assigned;
- An information centre should be established under the control of Special Forces to gather information and dispatch information to supporting services such as rescue and health, hospitals, relatives and the public;
- A pre-hospital facility, such as a field hospital, should be set up next to the site;
- Knowledge of civil defence saved many lives. It is therefore necessary to: reanimate civil defence courses; deliver information in simple and



easy-to-remember format (ie comics, leaflets); organise special classes in schools; and teach people how to speak to terrorists (psychology), how to maintain hydration balance, how to save energy and rehabilitate muscles when not allowed to move for a long time, and on behavioural patterns during rescue operations; and

- It is also important to try to prevent recruitment for suicide missions, especially of women and children; methods are needed to prevent marginalisation of such groups, including financial and humanitarian assistance, pensions and professional retraining.

Beslan school siege

This case shows terrorists are learning from their experiences, which is not exactly the case for state organisations. At Beslan, the attackers chose a building that could not be penetrated from underground and dismantled floors in some places. They brought dogs with them to detect gas, killed adults who might resist them and put children in windows as human shields.

An accidental explosion triggered a sequence of uncontrolled events. The explosions created a hole in the wall, which hostages ran through. As they started to leave the building, armed forces rushed into the building. Special Forces had to run behind, losing one of their main tactical advantages – that of sudden assault.

Another failure was a lack of preparedness. Information about possible terrorist attacks had been made available and orders were issued by the authorities – among them a request for more protection for schools. Information was also

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issued regarding the armed group gathering, but it was not apprehended.

Some of the local police departments claimed that they did not receive these orders, and many of the involved police and other staff members did not know what to do.

The school was supposed to have been protected by three policemen, but one of them was assigned to another group and could not be at the school. A police car with two road police officers should have been deployed to the scene, but was called away for other duties.

Interior military and special police group reserves were not called, leaving the school virtually unprotected save for a female officer (who killed one of the terrorists).

After the hostage taking, no adequate perimeter was established. Three guarded cordons did not prevent civilians, including armed local militia, from entering the scene. This was especially problematical on the last day, when many civilians became involved in the rescue operation.

Again, communication was a problem. For example, the public was told that 264 hostages had been taken – but this figure was also given to the person planning the operation. The terrorists were furious at the inaccurate information and shot several hostages.

During and after the assault, rescue and fire vehicles were hampered from reaching the scene because the streets were full of cars. The first fire vehicle did not have enough water.

Hostages were not assigned any ID, and the local population was heavily involved in both firefighting and rescuing hostages; people

brought hostages to hospitals without any tracking. As a result, more than 200 people were thought to be missing for several weeks, leading to rumours that terrorists had escaped from the school and taken hostages with them.

Lessons learned included:

- It is important to protect critical infrastructure, and heightened protection should be provided in areas of ethnic tension;
- When establishing and maintaining perimeters, consideration should be paid to how well armed the local population and paramilitary groups are;
- The command centre should be organised with clear leadership and command channels; relationships with politicians and commanders should be developed to limit their interference;
- Self mobilisation and freelancing participants should be avoided;
- Do not release provocative information to the media, nor disclose information that could affect planning or command centre operations;
- Be prepared to prevent and/or control mass gatherings of relatives and bystanders; and
- Develop an understanding of the terrorists' background and the motivation of groups which might become involved in such activities – this should include telephone lines for informants, and protection for those being forced to commit terrorist acts against their will.

Summary

It is vital for an unbiased and unequivocal leadership to 'own' the incident; moral and social aspects need to be clarified and enforced for the commanders of such incidents, who should be shielded from outside influence.

There should be only one central PR contact to present information from the command centre; communication should be clear and timely.

Victims need to be assigned identification immediately and they should be tracked. Field hospitals to treat badly injured victims on the spot would reduce loss of life.

■ This article is based on a presentation made at Wilton Park (p59)

Author

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