

Beslan Inquiry Under Fire

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Three months after the Beslan tragedy, families of siege victims challenge official investigation.

Residents of the North Ossetian town of Beslan, the scene of a bloody school siege three months ago, say their call last week for Russian president Vladimir Putin to take over the inquiry into the tragedy stems from their conviction that prosecutors are mishandling the case.

In a letter to Putin, signed by 800 Beslan residents, they said they had asked the Russian leader to intervene because they no longer trusted North Ossetia's government or the officials tasked with investigating the outrage, in which 330 hostages – more than half of them schoolchildren – were killed.

Locals say they want the president to take personal charge of the investigation and to identify and punish those responsible for the crime.

Suspected Chechen militants seized Beslan's School No. 1 on September 1, taking hostage some 1,200 pupils, parents and teachers. The victims died when Russian special forces stormed the building three days later in an attempt to free those inside.

The prosecutor general's North Caucasus office is in charge of the investigation, which is being carried out by two independent parliamentary commissions, one made up of North Ossetian deputies, the other comprising deputies and senators from the lower house of the Russian parliament.

Beslan residents say their impression of the investigation so far is that its progress and findings are being hidden from them. They suspect that they are being misled or lied to, and are now hoping to have face-to-face talks with the deputy prosecutor-general Vladimir Kolesnikov.

"Kolesnikov speaks to us at rallies," said Felisa Batagova, who lost her daughter and grandchildren in the siege. "But after what he said, we now fear we may stand accused of murder for bringing our kids to school on September 1."

The residents say the investigation has several failings to date: prosecutors wrongly interpreting information gleaned by investigators; the dismissal of evidence that the militants used a weapons cache in the school concealed there before the siege; the refusal to both account for delays in rescuing the hostages and to explain why Russian troops used flamethrowers in their assault.

Inhabitants of the town believe that investigators looking into the tragedy are doing an honest enough job, but suspect that prosecutors are distorting information they provide them in order to fit some preconceived account of the siege.

"The guys who come to talk to us write everything down verbatim. Sometimes they cannot hold back their tears. But then the prosecutors infer something completely different. We tell them one thing; they hear something else. It's like two parallel investigations, and truth is not what it's all about," said Susanna Dudieva, whose daughter died in the siege.

Prosecutors are insisting that the militants brought their guns and ammunition with them in the van they

used to get to the school, while residents believe that much of the weaponry had been hidden in the school, possibly under floorboards, prior to the raid.

“They had so much arms and ammunition they were able to keep shooting every which way for hours and days without interruption. How can you bring so much hardware in just one car? But that’s what the prosecutor guy said,” said former hostage Svetlana Bigaeva.

Residents want to know why vital time was lost between the recapture of the school and the freeing of the hostages. “Why didn’t the rescuing begin immediately?” asked Dudieva. “ My daughter told me they lay immobile on the floor for ages after the freeing began, but no one came for them.”

Locals also want to know why Russian troops used flamethrowers, banned by the Geneva conventions, in the operation to free the hostages. Mairbek Tuayev, chairman of the siege victims’ Public Council, told IWPR, “We know it wasn’t the terrorists who used those flamethrowers. No fire could have burned our kids so badly.”

The allegation that such weapons were deployed was confirmed by a source in one of the parliamentary commissions probing the atrocity. And a fireman who had been present at the scene also bolstered the claims, saying, “Some of the bodies found in the Beslan school had been burned so badly that the temperature would have to have been 800 or 900 degrees Celsius. No such temperature ever occurs even at the heart of a flame.”

Reflecting the mood of the increasingly frustrated Beslan residents, one local, Rita Dudieva, said, “How can [former interior minister] Dzhantiev still sport a uniform and receive a general’s hefty pension after our children died? Let them put police on every corner. Those slackers sit in the office all day, and only leave it to steal and extort money.”

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