

Beslan: A Nightmare Recalled

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Two teenage boys and a grandmother tell of captors who joked one minute and threatened to kill their hostages the next.

Azamat Belayev and Atsamaz Ktsoyev sit on a bench in front of Beslan's House of Culture and tell the story of how they became two of the survivors of School No. 1.

Behind the two teenage lads hangs a poster for Mel Gibson's film "The Passion of the Christ", which was due to be screened at the cultural centre the day the tragic drama began. Now it has been cancelled, like everything else in a town that has all but shut down.

The cultural centre, 200 metres from the fateful school, has become instead a meeting-place for relatives and friends exchanging the latest news on the missing and the wounded.

Unlike most of the survivors, the two 14-year-old school-friends want to talk about what they've been through.

Azamat's only sign of injury is a bandaged wrist from when he broke a window in his flight from the school. He talks in an unconstrained way, his eyes wide open with emotion.

"On the first day they mostly treated us alright," he began. "One of the fighters even said, 'Have you ever seen such nice terrorists?'"

"They gave us water - but only on the first day. They brought it in a bucket, they wet rags and we drank it that way. But then they stopped giving us water. We had to drink our own urine."

The hostages began growing hungry and the atmosphere got more menacing. "People saw a sweet in one woman's hand, and a fight broke out for that sweet." From time to time, he said the fighters fired shots in the air and shouted at people to make them obey their commands.

Describing the time he spent as a hostage, he said, "At first we felt fear, then hope and then we didn't care any more."

The first day, September 1, had begun as it did at every other school across Russia. Parents and relatives came in with their children to mark the first day of the new term. Azamat and Atsamaz had lined up with the rest of the pupils in the traditional way, waiting for the "First Bell" to announce the start of classes.

Then, said Azamat, the armed men burst in and herded them all into the gym hall. He estimated that there were 1,100 hostages there in all.

The boy said several of the attackers wore masks, and he believes some of them were Arabs.

“There were 10 or 15 of them in the hall, and more in the corridor. They had maybe 30 kilograms of explosives. They spent the first 20 minutes rigging up a wire between the basketball hoops along the whole gym and then hanging grenades on it.”

After two long days and nights of fearful waiting, the battle began.

“It all began because, probably by mistake, a bomb fell down and a window smashed. It was hard to understand what was going on. The roof immediately fell in,” said Azamat. “Everyone who was able to started running, but they began shooting at us from the roof. Just before the assault, the terrorists had taken off their camouflage and put on normal civilian clothes.”

“Everybody began to run - and we ran into the soldiers behind the garages. I ran through a barn, smashed the window and kept on running. It was every man for himself.”

The schoolboy smiled for the first time, saying he didn't used to like English classes, but now he wants to learn the language after talking to foreign journalists.

Azamat's parents, who were taken hostage with him, escaped alive. “Not everyone was lucky,” he said.

He saw two people shot by the fighters in front of him. Out of his 20 classmates, he knows that five have survived and four are dead. He doesn't know what has happened to others.

Atsamaz, his fellow-pupil, is more reserved. “I don't know what language they were speaking,” he began. “They humiliated us. They would shout out ‘everyone up!’, and then shoot over our heads and order us to sit down again.”

“The explosives were rigged up so that any of the terrorists could blow everything up. It was very crowded and hot, so people took their clothes off.”

Atsamaz is angry with his teachers, “The teachers treated us very badly, they shouted at us not to make a noise. They spread out on the floor, took up all the space and slept, while we spent three days squatting. They're pigs and not teachers! Only our Russian teacher Albina Fyodorovna tried to look after us. It was she who shouted ‘Don't go to the toilet, children, they'll shoot you!’”

Attempts to resist were dealt with harshly. “One man tried to fight the terrorists but they killed him straight away. Two of the women terrorists filmed us on a camera. A woman who'd pushed away a woman ‘shahidka’ [prospective martyr for Islam] was being dragged off, but then they let her alone,” said Atsamaz.

“Their leader had a broken arm. They joked a lot between themselves,” he continued. Both he and Azamat were able to recall snatched phrases they overheard from their captors: “We came here with Allah,” “No one needs you,” “If you make a noise we will shoot all men down to the ninth grade” - in other words anyone aged about 15 or older - and even a phrase in Ossetian: “Pray to Saint George” - a reference to the Ossetians' patron saint.

IWPR also met one of the adult hostages, Ella, a 62 year old pensioner from Beslan, who had gone to the school with her son and two grandsons. Her son and his elder boy got away. The younger child, 10 years old, is still missing.

Ella herself escaped with cuts to her head and leg and a bruised wrist. She burst into tears several times as she told her story. "I have seen such terrible things in my old age.

"I don't even understand how I jumped out of the window of the gym. It's quite amazing to me, how I jumped out. I said to myself, 'If I die, let me die.' But if God doesn't kill you, then, you know... otherwise how is it that as old as I am, I have survived this attack and our little boy is still not at home?"

"After it was over, some boys picked me up and carried me to a house in their arms. I got off very lightly. God probably loves me, is all I can think."

Recalling the thirst and hunger of the children, Ella went on, "I had a small chocolate bar" - indicating a length of about five centimetres - "I broke it up into three tiny bits for the children near me and quickly popped it in their mouths."

"When mothers with little babies said, 'Please give our babies a drop of water,' the terrorists said: 'If it can't stand it, it can die.' Their leader told us, 'Pray to God - those who are going to die, will die; those who deserve to live, will live. But we will make sure no one escapes with his life. You will drown in your own blood.'

"They called us 'prostitutes, drug addicts, scum, bastards'. Now, am I a bigger bastard than a Chechen? But the headmaster told the children, 'You're all heroes.'"

"What I saw - children drinking their own urine, their screaming - will always stay in my eyes and ears, even when I am in the grave," said Ella.

She broke down crying as she added, "I told myself, 'Let none of these children die, let me die instead. Because at least I've had 60 years of life, but this is just a kid, what has he seen yet?'"

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