



Left: The immaculate graves of the Beslan children. Top right: Grieving mothers



BACK TO Beslan

Two years ago, 330 people including 187 children were killed in a school massacre in Beslan, south Russia. The mothers of the dead are still fighting for answers on why this tragedy was allowed to happen...

In a tiny office decorated with children's photographs, a dozen women aged 25 to 45 sit around a black and white television. Dressed in black and wearing headscarves, they are transfixed by a badly dubbed American documentary that describes the siege in a school in southern Russia two years ago this month.

In one sequence, a girl who's bleeding and wearing just pants is seen crawling out of the burning building, only to return inside. The narrator explains that 10-year-old Aida Sidikova went back to find her mother. Miraculously, they both survived. In front of the TV, the women are sobbing. It's not just that the images are disturbing. These are their own children they are watching - some of whom died that day.

This is Beslan two years on - a quiet Russian town turned scene of a massacre that shocked the world, and a place where mothers spend their days struggling with grief. "Perhaps it's bad for us to see this," says former university lecturer Aneta Gadlyeva, 42. "But how can we avoid looking at the last images we have of our children?"

Other women sit talking in a small kitchen, eating salty sheep's cheese and black bread. But these are no ordinary women. They are the Beslan Mothers' Committee (BMC). In the past 24 months they have made political waves in Russia. In an impressive protest campaign, these former housewives and office workers have brought down the region's governor, embarrassed the secretive Russian authorities, and publicly



Above: a mother hugs her daughter as she mourns the death of a classmate
Right: painful memories



UNDER SIEGE

- On 1 September 2004, 32 terrorists took a Russian school hostage in Beslan.
- Hundreds of hostages were kept in the gym surrounded by bombs for 52 hours. They received no food or water.
- On the third day, it's believed that one bomb exploded and Russian troops stormed in, firing. The gym roof collapsed.
- In total 330 people were killed, and more than 700 injured.
- The one surviving terrorist was sentenced to life imprisonment in May 2006.
- Many of the surviving hostages continue to receive treatment.
- US\$1.2m has been donated to survivors - but this has proved highly contentious, with some receiving aid, others not.

challenged President Vladimir Putin. They blame the government and won't stop until they find out why their children were allowed to die.

THE DAY THAT STILL HAUNTS THEM

Arrive in Beslan today, and it looks like just another sleepy town in the foothills of the snow-capped Caucasus mountains. Yet among the wooden houses and quiet streets, freshly painted murals of doves and rainbows are a reminder of what happened here on 1 September 2004 - the first day of the new school year and traditionally a day of celebration in Russia.

Children set off for school in their best clothes, clutching flowers for their teachers. Like many parents that morning, Aneta Gadiyeva walked to school with her daughter, Alana, nine, and baby Milena. "Alana was so excited about going back to school, she hardly slept."

As they reached the school their excitement turned to horror. "I was thinking how lovely the teachers had made the playground look, with balloons and ribbons, when a group of men in masks appeared, shouting and waving guns. I clutched my baby and held tight to Alana, telling her it would be alright. I was so scared I could hardly speak. The men herded us into the gym and made us sit on the floor. There were hundreds of people in there."

As the siege took hold, the world's media descended. The hostage-takers were sympathetic to nearby Chechnya, a Muslim region that has

been fighting for independence from Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union, said reports. The terrorists were demanding the release of local prisoners and the withdrawal of Russian troops from Chechnya.

Inside the gym, however, Aneta and the other parents remained ignorant. "We had no idea who the men were. We were told to hand over our mobile phones and not make noise. We tried to calm the children. I could see bombs and explosives attached to the wall bars and basketball hoops."

As the day wore on, Aneta and her children received no food or water. "Alana kept asking, 'When can we go home?'" says Aneta. "I tried to comfort her but we were so hot, hungry and thirsty. Parents were telling their children to urinate into their shoes and drink it. I don't know how we managed to get through the night. Most were too afraid to sleep. Many babies were crying."

The following day, there appeared to be a breakthrough. A government negotiator persuaded the terrorists to free Aneta and 11 other women with babies. But there was a catch. They'd have to leave their older children behind. "It was agonising - the most terrible thing I've ever had to do," she says. "We thought and thought about it. In the end most of us decided to leave with our babies. It didn't even cross our minds that the government wouldn't rescue our children." Aneta had to break the news to Alana. "She was crying, 'Mummy, please don't leave me.' I kissed her, hugged her and told her to be a brave girl. I said I'd see her again very soon. That was

the last time I ever saw her. I wish I could have taken her place."

"To this day I'm haunted by the vision of her alone in that terrible place. I left her. I still see her face, wet with tears, and hear her voice begging me to stay. My husband suffered terribly, too - many of the fathers did."

The siege would last three days. Outside, anxious parents and local security forces waited. "The second day passed in much the same way as the first," says Susanna Dudiyeva, whose daughter Zarina, 18, and son Zaurbek, 13, were also inside. "As soon as I heard about the siege, I raced to the school. There were dozens of parents there, most of them weeping. No one could tell us what was happening. We begged the police to let us into the building but they refused."

Susanna waited all night in the schoolyard. "We were praying our children would be safe. When the mothers with babies were released the next day it gave us hope to know our children were still alive. We were

waiting for the government to do something. On the third day, we heard a loud explosion and suddenly soldiers were pouring into the gym, firing. People ran out - children in their underwear, screaming, crying, jumping out of windows. We went to help them, shouting out our children's names. I couldn't see my Zaurbek anywhere." Tragically, the gym roof caught fire and collapsed, killing many hostages. Later, Susanna discovered that her daughter had escaped - but Zaurbek had died. "I just went numb," she says. "For days I couldn't eat or sleep. I was sick to my bones."

WHY DID THIS HAPPEN?

For the parents whose children survived, relief was swift with the end of the siege. But for others, initial shock and grief were compounded by anger. Why, they asked, had this atrocity been allowed to happen?

In response to mounting pressure, the Russian government commissioned a preliminary report stating that a bomb had gone off on the third day, so local security forces had stormed the school. A gun battle had ensued, setting off more explosives. Thirty one hostage-takers were killed; the 32nd was sentenced to life imprisonment in May this year. No blame was attributed to the Russian authorities. If they'd had a rescue plan, it wasn't revealed.

That might have been the end of it, but Susanna, Aneta and other mothers began visiting each other to share their grief. More and more mothers came, and talk turned to anger at the government's response. When their group reached 50, they rented a tiny office and the BMC was born.

Two areas concerned them. First, why had so many terrorists passed police check points before reaching the school only three years after Chechens had taken 700 people hostage in a Moscow theatre? Second, why had the government sent in local security forces instead of experienced federal troops?

Clearly, the suggestion that terrorists had easy access to a Russian school would be embarrassing to President Putin, who had promised to wipe out Chechen violence. The Russian authorities are notorious for their secrecy and disinterest in public opinion, but the BMC were not put off. They wrote and asked for a meeting, an independent inquiry into the siege and for the government to take blame for the botched rescue attempt. (They believe →