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CULTURE



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Bloodbath: 140 dead after Moscow theatre is stormed

- Gas chokes captives
- Terrorists shot in seats

THE women's black-cloaked bodies lay sprawled in their bloodstained seats, as anonymous in death as they had been when they threatened to blow themselves and their hundreds of hostages to perdition.



Mark Franchetti

They were killed where they sat yesterday, their unexploded bombs still strapped to their stomachs, when commandos stormed the Moscow theatre where Chechen rebels had held Russia to ransom for three days.

The women — some of the 18 who had waited, detonators in hand, ready to blow up the theatre — were first gassed and then shot at close range. Now they lay motionless, slumped in the seats.

Outside, the half-naked and blood-spattered body of a man lay in the cold on the steps of the theatre. He had been shot in the head, probably by a sniper. At a fold-up table next to the corpse a woman investigator sat taking notes, while another prodded the lifeless body.

All around were signs of heavy fighting. There were shattered windscreens on cars. Personal possessions, shoes and clothing lay among empty machinegun shells.

The bodies of a man and a woman were spread out on the wet tarmac of the theatre car park, probably killed in cross-fire as they attempted to escape the bloodshed. Police lifted them into body bags.

Nearby was a huge mound of hostages' coats and bags, which had been taken from the theatre cloakroom and dumped

on the bloodstained street outside. In its depths, a mobile phone kept ringing.

At least 90 of the more than 800 hostages died when the Russians broke the siege in the early morning. Hours later relatives were still desperately trying to find out if a missing loved one was alive or dead.

Yidica Low, from north London, who was among those freed, was reunited last night with her husband, Peter, 59, released by the gunmen on Thursday because of a heart condition. Their son, Richard, 20, was recovering in hospital.

About 350 of those who survived the ordeal were receiving medical care in hospitals across Moscow. Many had been poisoned by gas pumped through the theatre's air-conditioning system to stun the terrorists and prevent them from detonating their explosives.

Doctors said some hostages succumbed to heart attacks as a result, while others had choked to death. Scores were suffering from breathing difficulties.

In all, 42 Chechens were killed in the raid. Most were shot in the head by snipers after being immobilised by the knockout gas. Several were



Bloody battle: the bodies of Chechen rebels lie slumped in theatre seats. They were killed when Russian forces stormed the Moscow building to free more than 800 hostages

hunted down and executed in the corridors of the building. There were fears, however, that others had escaped.

The scene inside the theatre was very different from the last time I had entered, less than 48 hours earlier. To interview Movsar Barayev, the 25-year-old terrorist ringleader.

Then, it had been eerily quiet and desolate. Now dozens of Russian investigators from the

FSB, the former KGB, investigators from the criminal police, the state prosecutor's office, and special forces officers were busy examining the bodies of the gunmen and female suicide bombers who had brought the war in

Chechnya to the streets of central Moscow.

Barayev, who told me that he wanted to die, met his end on the second floor of the theatre next to the room where we had talked. Still in camouflage uniform, he lay in a pool of

his own blood, surrounded by curious Russian officers.

"We lost a fair number of hostages, and that is a tragedy, but all in all, this was a success," said a special forces man.

"They didn't even have the time to realise what had hit them. The gas came in and they were knocked out on the spot. That's when the building was stormed."

The theatre floor was littered

with shattered glass, empty shells and trails of blood. Explosives officers combed the building with sniffer dogs, while bomb disposal units with a robot device were called to the second floor to defuse a mine.

A landing under the staircase, which I had used to reach Barayev, had become a makeshift morgue. The bodies of 12 hostage-takers lay side by side in pools of blood. Their faces

had already turned stone white.

As I walked further into the theatre, I saw many more Chechen bodies. Some were men and women I had met. Now they were unrecognisable. Forensic officers photographed them, and taped a number to each corpse. Figures in surgical gloves lifted bloodied clothes to note the wounds.

Investigators leant over them to note the wounds. *Continued on page 3*

Full reports and analysis, pages 2-6
Face to face with the terror chief, page 5

Don't jail burglars, make them say sorry, urge police chiefs

POLICE chiefs are proposing that criminals should be given the chance to apologise to their victims in court rather than be prosecuted and risk going to jail.

Senior officers have told the Home Office they want offenders to sign a "going straight" contract in return for escaping prosecution. It would require them to make a direct personal apology in court.

They would also have to read

David Leppard

out a detailed "binding" statement explaining how they planned to stay out of trouble and to make amends to their victims. Compensation could come in the form of cash payments or doing odd jobs for the victim.

The proposal — which the police and senior lawyers from the Crown Prosecution Service

want included in home secretary David Blunkett's forthcoming criminal justice bill — has alarmed some anti-crime campaigners, who fear such a liberal approach would be abused by criminals.

Norman Brennan, director of the Victims of Crime Trust, said: "Many young offenders have utter contempt for the law-abiding public. They will say and do anything to evade being prosecuted. I hope this is not

used as an excuse not to prosecute those who rightly need prosecuting."

Police, however, believe the scheme would cut reoffending and reduce pressure on Britain's overcrowded jails. Offenders — including burglars, shoplifters, muggers and those involved in domestic violence — would be covered if police and prosecutors judged it an effective approach.

Continued on back page

Fire strikes suspended

Fire Brigade union officials decided yesterday to suspend their first two strikes after internal meetings.

The move to call off the 48-hour strikes planned for October 29-31 and November 2-4 followed "constructive" pay talks on Friday with John Prescott, the deputy prime minister.

Full story, page 17

Blair will give student grant sop to middle class

CHARLES CLARKE'S first move as education secretary is likely to be bringing back living allowances for students in an attempt to soften the blow of higher university tuition fees, writes David Cracknell.

The grants are likely to be limited to a few hundred pounds a year for better-off families but Downing Street is insisting on the step to avoid a damaging political

backlash from swing voters. The disclosure comes as it emerged this weekend that Estelle Morris, who resigned last week saying she was not up to the job, will be called as a witness in a High Court action over the sacking of her exams chief during the A-level regrading episode.

Sir William Stubbs, who she dismissed last month as head of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

(QCA), is to issue a writ against the government for wrongful dismissal.

As the dust settled in *Continued on back page*



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A World of Difference

Grim death toll emerges as Russia breaks siege

as Russia breaks siege

THE SIEGE

WEDNESDAY, 8.55pm
More than 700 people prepare for the second act of the popular musical Nord-Ost at Moscow theatre about 2.5 miles from the Kremlin

9.00pm
Vans draw up outside theatre and kidnappers pile out. Chechen rebels leap onto stage firing in air and the three-day siege begins



Snipers and 'special gas' launched daring attack

The denouement of the drama came just before dawn yesterday, when a single blast followed by the chatter of gunfire echoed through the streets of Moscow.

It was 6.30am, and outside the giant Palace of Culture building, where Chechen gunmen had taken more than 800 people hostage in an audacious attempt to bring their independence struggle to the heart of Russia, sirens began blaring in the street.

A group of Russian soldiers was seen advancing towards the theatre entrance. They smashed the glass doors to get in. Others were already inside, having blown a hole in the wall of the theatre. A pump of sedative gas had been fired into the building.

Unscripted third act put audience into tragic play

AN incurable fan of musicals, Vika Prentina had looked forward to the show Nord-Ost for days. Many of her friends had already seen the romantic drama and tickets were hard to come by. On Wednesday the 19-year-old at last took her seat with her parents.

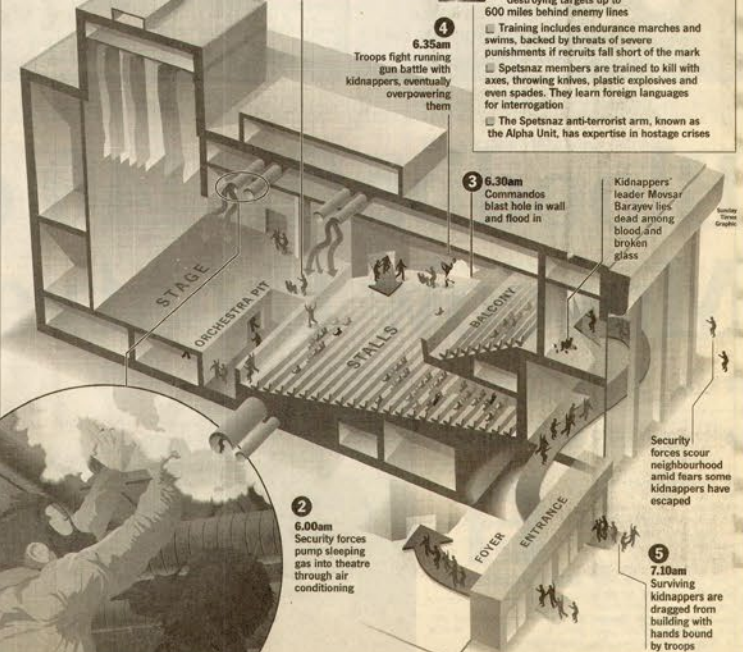
The first act lived up to her expectations. A wartime tale of love between a Russian pilot and the beautiful daughter of an Arctic fleet commander, the show mesmerised the young girl.

Less than five minutes into the second act there was a dramatic change of scene: from Russia during the second world war to the continuing bloody conflict in Chechnya, the breakaway republic. As a group of actors wearing Soviet uniforms danced and sang patriotic songs, some 50 masked fighters, clad in black and armed with machineguns, grenades and explosives, broke into the theatre and onto the stage.

At first Prentina thought this was part of the show. "I found it amusing, but then they started shooting into the air and shouting threats," she said. "They said they were Chechens and shouted that nothing would happen to us if we in Chechnya

THE RESPONSE

1 SATURDAY 5.30am
Negotiation breaks down and two hostages are shot, prompting the storming of the theatre



2 6.00am
Security forces pump sleeping gas into theatre through air conditioning

3 6.30am
Commandos blast hole in wall and flood in

4 6.35am
Troops fight running gun battle with kidnappers, eventually overpowering them

5 7.10am
Surviving kidnappers are dragged from building with hands bound by troops

Terror in the theatre

Moscow was oblivious to the crisis inside the theatre. Then a few minutes before 10pm a young correspondent at the news agency Interfax, who was in the audience with her husband, made a chilling call to her office on her mobile phone.

Within minutes the police were frantically sealing off the area around the theatre. Commandos from the elite Alpha special forces dashed to the scene and snipers took up positions on rooftops. Armoured personnel carriers appeared.

Vladimir Putin, the Russian president, was preparing to go home from the Kremlin when the news reached him. Shortly afterwards came the rebel ultimatum: withdraw Russian troops from Chechnya or the hostages will die.

For a leader, who to a great extent owes his election victory 2½ years ago to his tough stance in Chechnya, this was the biggest test of his presidency. It seemed inconceivable that he would withdraw from Chechnya; but would he risk a bloodbath of hundreds of innocent civilians?

Shortly before midnight Barayev released a hostage with the warning that he would kill 10 people for every one of his fighters who was hurt. Putin cancelled a visit to Berlin to meet Gerhard Schröder, the German chancellor, looking strained, he appeared on state television being briefed by close advisers; but the pictures were without sound and there was no statement from the president.

Inside the theatre Treyman remained hidden in the lavatory. "We spent two hours inside trying to understand what was going on," she said. "We heard

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Russian rescuers carry people from the theatre as others lie outside. It was unclear whether they were dead or overcome by the knockout gas used to storm the building

operation. "We see it," she added, referring to the gas. "We feel it, we are breathing through our clothes." The conversation was interrupted by gunshots.

Later, hundreds of hostages were given the hotline number and they could tell us where Lydia is. Victor did a little dance and said, "Hooray for the special forces!"

Ira, sitting in the back of a purple Lada, had been told by nurses to go home as none of the former hostages would be released that day and nobody was being allowed inside to see their relations and friends. Despite lines of anxiety around her mouth, she was happy.

"My daughter Katya was in a healthy enough state to remember her phone number and I phoned her to tell me she was all right," she said.

Bush showed the world what to do with these bastards after September 11. It's Putin's turn to liquidate them in Russia

Stepan, waiting outside Skifosovsky hospital, was in despair. "I have tracked down three of my four friends who went to see the show that night, but Natasha is nowhere to be found," he said.

A cigarette hung from his mouth and his eyes drooped: "I have donated blood today and I hope she gets it — we are the same group."

Once sufficiently recovered from the effects of the gas, all the former hostages were to be interviewed inside the hospitals while their impressions of the past few days remained fresh in their minds.

When they had assembled at the theatre on Wednesday evening to watch Nord-Ost, or North-East, a production about a Soviet wartime romance, they had no inkling of what was in store for them.

After the bloody climax to the drama, camouflage-clad troops fed hostages out of the modernist slab of a building. The floor was carpeted in detritus from three days of human occupation.

Relatives of the hostages had been dreading a decision to storm the building, knowing that Putin, whose prestige was built on his reputation as the "hammer of the Chechens", would almost certainly feel pressure to act.

In the end, however, some voiced relief that the death toll had not been higher. "We were amazed that this could happen like this, without more victims," said the father of one girl who had been among the hostages and who survived.

Others urged Putin to follow the example of George Bush, the American president. "Putin has only one choice," said Igor Konstantinov, a pensioner who lives near the theatre. "Bush showed the world what to do with these bastards after September 11. It's Putin's turn to liquidate them in Russia."

Nikolai Parnishev, the head of the intelligence service that masterminded the operation to storm the building, termed it a stunning success. "None of them got away," he said of the gunmen, although his comments were contradicted by interior ministry reports that some of the hostage-takers were missing.

Alexander Vershbow, the US ambassador to Moscow, congratulated the Russian authorities on the outcome. "We are relieved the hostage crisis has come to an end," he told journalists outside his embassy.

"We congratulate the Russian authorities for their success in limiting the loss of innocent life."

The ambassador said the Chechens had committed a "terrorist act" and that "the United States condemns terrorism in the strongest possible terms wherever it occurs. There can be no justification for kidnapping and killing innocent civilians."

According to Vasilyev, the deputy interior minister, the decision to storm the building was taken when shots were heard at around 5.30am. It was feared that the Chechen gunmen were beginning to execute hostages and preparing to detonate their explosives.

By that stage, he said, all but a few people with gunshot wounds were suffering from exposure to the gas, which caused serious breathing difficulties. "There were only a few people with gunshot wounds," said one. "The main diagnosis is poisoning."

Hospital sources said several patients had died of heart attacks and some had choked after vomiting. However, government officials denied that any hostages had been killed by "special substances" used in the assault.

REPORTING TEAM

Moscow
Mark Franchetti, Clem Cecil, Katya Lebedeva, Valeriya Korchagina, Dima Belikov

London
Matthew Campbell, Nick Rufford, Nick Fielding, David Leppard

Hunt begins for Chechens' accomplices

Continued from page 1

and walked among the bodies, leaving bloody footprints around the hall. Others congratulated one another on the success of the operation.

I followed a blood trail into the auditorium, where hostages had been held at gunpoint. The air was heavy with the stench that the Chechens had planted in the centre of the auditorium. Outside, the mobile phone under the pile of coats taken from the cloakroom was still ringing. A few yards away, in a small courtyard on the side of the building, the Russians had made another tragic discovery. Clearly visible in a corner was the dead body of Barayev's first victim, who was killed the night the Chechens took the theatre. He had gone to the show straight from work — in his Russian army colonel's uniform.

Special operations to detain the Chechen hostages are already under way in some regions of the north Caucasus, including Chechnya.

A source in Russia's security agencies told the country's

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British mother and son among the survivors

THE RESCUE

A BRITISH mother and her son were recovering in Moscow last night after surviving the bloody end to the theatre siege, writes Nicholas Rufford.

Sidica Low, a school technician, and her son Richard, a 20-year-old Oxford University student, were among at least 70 foreigners who fled or were rescued after the gun battle between Russian special forces and Chechen rebels.

Peter Low, a retired advertising executive, is thought to have experienced heart problems brought on by the stress of the event. The gunmen offered to release him into the care of Franchetti, the only foreign journalist allowed inside the theatre to listen to the rebels' demands. Reluctant to leave with his wife and

Richard Low, who went to Oxford from Queen Elizabeth's grammar school in north London, arrived in Moscow a month ago to begin a year's study at a language school as part of his degree. His parents were visiting him.

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Freed: Peter Low is led away

son still inside the theatre, Low said: "It's terrible. I am terrified for them."

Louise Low, Richard's sister, was being comforted by friends at the family's home in Southgate, London. She was "just sitting by the phone waiting for news", said a neighbour.

One family friend said: "Richard had e-mailed to say how much he was looking forward to his parents coming to Moscow. He had been a little apprehensive about what life in Russia would be like."

the other foreign survivors. Richard Low, who went to Oxford from Queen Elizabeth's grammar school in north London, arrived in Moscow a month ago to begin a year's study at a language school as part of his degree. His parents were visiting him.

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Face to face with the terror chief

DREAM OF MARTYRDOM

Mark Franchetti got inside the besieged theatre for an exclusive interview with Movsar Barayev, leader of the terrorists, who told him why they were on a suicide mission



'We have come here to die': Movsar Barayev relaxes with a masked colleague in the theatre. Franchetti got his interview with the Chechen leader after calling him on his mobile phone

THE baby-faced commander betrayed no emotions as he looked me in the eyes and said that he wanted to die. And if he died, he added calmly, hundreds of hostages would die with him.

Movsar Barayev, 25, the leader of the Chechen gang that was holding Russia to ransom, was giving his only interview during the siege — which ended bloodily yesterday.

"Our dream is to become *shakhsidi*, martyrs of Allah," he said as we sat inside the besieged theatre.

"The ball is in Putin's court now. It's up to him if he wants to have the lives of all these people on his conscience. We are more than determined to die here. Allah has already fulfilled our dreams by just allowing us to come to Moscow and mount this operation successfully. The war in Chechnya must stop. If Putin doesn't act we will go all the way."

There was barely any menace in his sparsely stubbled face, but the complete lack of expression in his eyes was unnerving. It was the second night of the siege. Early in the day Barayev had turned the screws on the Russian government by allowing the hostages to plead over their mobile phones for troops not to attack.

He had then released Maria Shkolnikova, a cardiologist who brought out a statement from the hundreds inside the auditorium calling for a peaceful solution. Sensing that Barayev might be willing to talk, I passed a message through Shkolnikova, asking to be let into the building. After brief consultations, the Chechens gave the go-ahead.

Less than an hour later I was walking slowly towards the theatre with Iosif Kobzon, a Russian singer who was also deputy in the Duma, the lower house of the Russian parliament, and two representatives of the Red Cross who were delivering a suitcase of medicines.

We passed the last police cordon and small groups of Russian forces of Chechens with sniper rifles aimed at the building. Slowly we crossed the car park and walked between the minivans used by Barayev's men. The vehicles were jammed in time, doors still open, headlights on.

The main entrance of the theatre had the scars of a fierce gun exchange. We walked over shards of glass and through doors riddled with large bullet holes. On the floor lay empty machinegun shells. Hundreds of coats, hats and scarves belonging to the hostages still hung from hooks in the cloakroom. A felt hat lay on the counter, covered in thick dust.

The silence was disturbing. As we ventured slowly into the building, the Red Cross officials began to call out to warn the hostage takers that we were approaching the stairs.

To reach the stairwell we had to open a glass door. I looked up and saw a gunman pointing a Kalashnikov at us from the steps above. He wore camouflage trousers, a leather jacket and a black balaclava mask which showed only his eyes and mouth.

The gunman signalled us to walk up the stairs slowly. He was nervous and appeared surprised to see us. Three other hostage takers, one on each flight of stairs, had their guns aimed at us. We introduced ourselves several times.

A long foyer on the first floor was in darkness. The rebels had closed all the curtains, apparently for fear of snipers. Overturned tables lay on the floor, blocking escape routes. We were a few yards from an entrance to the auditorium where the hostages were held.

A stockily built masked figure introduced himself as Barayev's right-hand man. He wore a new camouflage uniform, carried a machinegun and had a pistol strapped to his front. Menacing and defiant, he thrust out his chest and moved restlessly, keeping at a safe distance from us at all times. Five other gunmen escorted us, exchanging commands in Chechen.

Speaking Russian with a heavy Chechen accent, Barayev's deputy expressed himself in short terse bursts. I was asked to identify myself. "Flash newspaper? Okay. Good," said one of the gunmen. "We have an Englishman who is not well inside. We will give him to you and you can take him outside."

To my left the door to the auditorium was suddenly flung open. A Chechen fighter emerged holding a man in his late

fifties by the arm. Clearly confused and deeply distraught, the man stood by my side. "Here, you can take him outside," said the rebel.

I leaned over and asked the hostage if he was British. Dazed and surprised to hear English, he nodded. I tried to reassure him and told him that he was being set free.

"My name is Peter Low," he said. "My wife and son are still in there but I have a heart condition."

He pressed a hand against his chest and started to cry. He looked scared and emotionally drained. He was clearly torn between escaping from the hostage takers and leaving his loved ones behind.

"My son Richard lives here," he said. "He studies Russian at university and has a few months more out here as part of his course. My wife and I came out here to visit and were stuck on a night out at the theatre when this happened. It's terrible. I am terrified for them."

Kobzon had been hoping to establish a dialogue with the rebels. However, he was quickly rebuffed by Barayev's lieutenant.

"We don't need any help," he snapped. "Why hasn't Putin called us? Who does he think he is? Is he that important, is he that big that he cannot find time to deal with this situation? What else does he have to do which is more important than dealing with us?"

Kobzon tried to give him a walkie-talkie to establish a direct line of communication with the Russian negotiators, but the gunman rejected it. Asked to release all the women, he said in Chechnya women and children died every day.

"We are a suicide group," he said, suddenly becoming more agitated. "Here we have bombs and rockets and mines. Our women suicide bombers have their fingers on a detonator at all times. Time is running out. Time is running out for you. It has been ever since we took over this building. Stop the war in Chechnya and withdraw Russian troops. For two years we have shown patience, now we have come to die here. Let the Russians just try to storm the building. That's all we are waiting for. We cherish death more than you do life."

However, the hostage takers had decided to make a gesture. Another gunman brought out three little Russian girls. So terrified that they could barely move, the children cried silently. A masked rebel stroked one girl on the head

through an empty door frame, I called out again and again to the gunman. No reply.

I stood there for 20 minutes. Finally, I walked into the theatre shouting out my name. I reached the glass door to the staircase, looked up and saw a masked man on the steps with an AK-47 aimed at me.

This time, walking up to the first floor took several minutes. Four Chechens followed my every move from different positions on the stairs. One ordered me not to move while another barked instructions to walk up. I froze. Another gunman told me to take off my heavy jacket and throw it up to him so that he could check it for weapons.

Barayev's bullish lieutenant was waiting on the first-floor landing. This time he wore no mask. He looked less than 30, but his hardened face matched his voice and posture.

He led me back into the foyer and ordered me to lean against the wall. He searched me and checked my camera. Behind him several of his men stood guard.

I told him that the Russians had given me the name of a hostage who they hoped he would agree to let go, the mother of a two-month-old baby.

"Forget it," he said. "We are not releasing anyone now. If she has a two-month baby, what was she doing at the theatre instead of being home?"

He took me into a small office that had been used as a storage room for beverages and food sold at the bar of the theatre. It had been looted. Empty handbags and wallets lay strewn among crates, cardboard boxes, torn documents and clothes. A till had been thrown on the floor.

Barayev strode in, oozing self-confidence. Wearing camouflage, a black woollen beret and cradling an AK-47, he was unmasked.

Although so young, he had a commanding presence among his men. It was easy to see why. He came from a Chechen clan that has been accused of kidnapping, torturing and executing hostages.

His uncle Arbi Barayev, who brought him up, was responsible for the appalling 1998 abduction and beheading of three Britons and a New Zealander who had been working for Granger Telecom, a British company. According to a fellow hostage who survived, the four men were killed because Osama Bin Laden's Al-Qaeda organisation was willing to pay much more than the proposed ransom to ensure that they were murdered.

After his uncle was killed by Russian troops in June 2001, Barayev took over the leadership of the 300-strong group. Two months later the Russians claimed to have killed him, too. It was one of many such claims that proved unfounded.

"This is a dream come true," he said. "Our spirits have been higher. We feel great. Our task was to come here and take hostages. We have done that. Now we have no plans to leave with the hostages. We don't

care. Our aim is not to stay alive. It is to force Russian troops out of Chechnya. We are not terrorists. If we were, we would have demanded millions of dollars and a plane to escape."

"Twice he was interrupted by calls from supporters in Chechnya on a mobile phone that he kept in a hand grenade strap tied to his side next to a pistol. At one point he lowered his guard. Maybe succumbing to the late-of-life, he offered to let me film the hostages in the auditorium. His right-hand man

fiercely disagreed, fearing that they would be giving too much away. They briefly left the storeroom to confer in the dark foyer while I was left with another Chechen in a leather jacket who smiled through his black mask while holding an AK-47.

"You know, I too would rather go fishing than doing this, but we have no choice," he said.

Barayev came back. There would be no more filming but, like a host showing off his house, he took me to one of the

first-floor entrances to the auditorium where the hostages were being held. A table from the bar had been placed in front of the door as a barricade. There Barayev and his men paraded three Chechen women dressed in black with headscarves covering all but their eyes. In one hand each held a pistol, in the other a detonator linked to a short wire attached to 5kg of explosive strapped to her stomach. Except for a beam of light from inside the auditorium, the foyer was dark. One of Barayev's men

used a torch to show off the explosives belts. "They work in shifts," explained Barayev. "Those on duty have their finger on a detonator at all times. One push of the button and they will explode. The auditorium is mined, all wired up with heavy explosives. Just let the Russians try to break in and the whole place will explode."

Less than a minute later Barayev had vanished without a word. The audience was over. He had an appointment with death.



End of mission: Barayev lies dead after the attack

Our aim is not to stay alive. It is to force Russian troops out of Chechnya. We are not terrorists. If we were, we would have demanded millions of dollars and a plane to escape

and told her not to worry. Seconds later Lubov Karmilova, their anguished mother, was led out. The children threw themselves against her, clinging to her arms and legs. She scooped up the smallest and covered her with a jacket. "We asked to see Barayev but we were told curtly that he was resting. His right-hand man was no longer in the mood to talk. I pulled out a business card and tried to hand it over. 'Go, go, go,' he snapped.

One of his gunmen pushed me towards the landing and we quickly left the building through the desolate and bullet-ridden ground-floor entrance. Outside, where teams of doctors and Russian security officials waited, Karmilova and her children were whisked to safety in an ambulance before being rushed to hospital.

At the nerve centre of the rescue operation, a small build-

I decided to try again to see Barayev. With the help of a Chechen middle man, I managed to call him on his personal mobile phone.

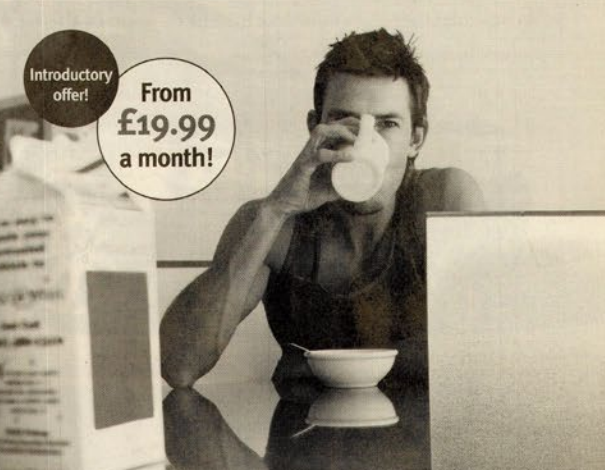
I told him that I had travelled many times to Chechnya to report on the war. Would he grant me a face-to-face interview? There was a short pause. "Okay, I'll give you 20 minutes. Bring a TV camera and come alone."

Three hours later the Kremlin gave me permission to re-enter the theatre. By then night had fallen.

The middle man had arranged to call Barayev before I crossed the last line of special forces into the no man's land of the theatre car park. But Barayev's phone was switched off. We called dozens of times in vain.

Hoping for the best, I walked slowly to the theatre entrance with my hands in the air and went up the steps to the shattered glass doors. Leaning

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