

Report *Beslan*

The Kulovs, from left: Alan, 16, Diana, 8, their mother, Zhanna, baby Milana, and Angelina, 3. Alan was badly hurt in the siege; his brother Oleg, then 8, died in it



Graduation day is a sombre and painful time in Beslan. While across Russia school children celebrate one of life's main milestones by bringing flowers to school for their teachers, in this small community entire classrooms head for a separate section of the town's cemetery.

Known as the City of Angels, this sprawling plot of land is where most of the 333 people who died in the Beslan school massacre, Russia's worst-ever terrorist attack, were laid to rest. More than half were children, and every second headstone is adorned with toys.

Graduates gather silently around the tombs of their slain former classmates, on what should have been their last day at school. White balloons, one for each missing pupil, are released into the sky. Last year 16 children killed in the terrorist attack would have finished school. This year, 13 balloons drifted above the tombs. Even late at night, the cemetery is rarely without >>>→



‘OLEG CAME TO ME IN MY DREAMS WHILE I WAS PREGNANT. HE ASKED ME TO BUY A DRESS. NOW HIS SISTER WEARS IT. I LOOK AT HER AND THINK MY SON IS STILL WITH US’

This mother's youngest son was killed in the Beslan school massacre, which claimed the lives of hundreds of others. Five years on, Mark Franchetti finds a town still haunted by its past. Photographs by Dmitry Belyakov

visitors. Like Milana Adirkhayeva, most relatives go there to speak to their dead. The nine-year-old and her elder sister, Emilia, survived the school siege. Their mother, 27-year-old Irina, died of gunshot wounds. Milana was only four then, but the image of her mother stroking her head as their life hung in the balance during the hostage drama is forever etched in her memory.

“As soon as I think of Mum I want to cry – I miss her so much,” she says. “I speak to her on her tomb, then on my birthday each year I write, ‘Mum, I love you, I’ll never forget you’ on a note. I tie it to a balloon with a Fruittella sweet, then release it into the sky and hope it will reach her.”

September 1 will mark the fifth anniversary of a massacre that killed more children – 186 of them – than any other terrorist attack in history. Seventeen children lost both parents and 72 were seriously disabled. One block of flats close to the school lost 34 children.

In 2004, a disbelieving world reached out to Beslan with empathy and more than £20m of funding, though many could not comprehend just what had driven a gang of terrorists to take the lives of innocent children in a community of 35,000. Since then the town’s residents have not only had to cope with their loss, but with other distorting aftershocks: anger over how some of that money was spent; distrust of the authorities who failed to protect the town; and uncertainty about the future for survivors. Five years on, are there any signs that Beslan will recover from its unimaginable grief, or that anyone will be held to account for what happened?

I first came to Beslan two days after the school massacre. The agony of the bereaved hung over the town like a heavy cloak as the streets clogged with funeral processions. At the school building and the cemetery there were heartbreaking scenes, as mothers screamed and fainted. Today the town is typical of others in North Ossetia, a predominantly orthodox and strongly conservative region of Russia’s north Caucasus. It is sleepy and rural. There is no obvious sign of the town’s deep emotional scars, until one meets Beslan’s School No 1. The building has been left exactly the way it was after the ferocious gun battle between the terrorists and Russia’s special forces that ended the 52-hour siege. It stands as a memorial to the dead and a poignant symbol of the town’s divisions.

Former hostages and relatives of those who died at the school are still split over what should be done with the building. Many think it should have been pulled down; others would literally lie in front of the bulldozers to preserve it.

It was here in the school gym that three dozen terrorists armed with AK-47s, grenade launchers and explosives, and demanding an end to the war in neighbouring Chechnya, crammed more than 1,100 hostages, including 750 children, into a space smaller than a basketball court. The



Above: Bert Kusov, who was shot twice during the siege. Right: Bert today; he seems to have made a full recovery



Far right: Aida Sidakova, 6, desperately scans the gym for her mother

men from the Riyadus-Salikhin terror group who wired the gym with explosives were exceptionally brutal. On the first day they executed a man in front of his two children and the other hostages simply because he had dared to speak. They then led several men at gunpoint to a classroom on the first floor, sprayed them with machinegun fire and threw their bodies out of a window. The hostages were held for three days in soaring temperatures, without food or water. Most of those who died were killed when three explosions went off at noon on September 3. The first blast is thought to have been accidental, the other two were triggered by the terrorists. The last, most powerful explosion set the gym on fire and brought down the roof, trapping hostages under scorching debris, blazing beams, searing iron and burning plastic. As wounded and terror-stricken hostages scrambled over maimed bodies, bullets and rocket-propelled grenades rained down on them.

Large charred dents in the gym’s wooden floorboards still clearly mark the spot where some of the hostages burnt to death. All around, on the gym’s blackened and bullet-ridden walls, hang the portraits of the victims. Flowers and wreaths, candles and fluffy animal toys line the gym next to bottles of mineral water and fizzy cans left for those who died thirsty, denied water by the terrorists. The walls are scrawled with handwritten messages, verses and poems from the grieving to



A mother mourns at the graves of her family lost during the siege

the dead. A large, wooden orthodox cross stands in the gym. It’s a harrowing, deeply moving place.

The rest of the school is eerie and sinister. The spots where two female suicide bombers – the only two women among the terrorists – exploded, splattering black hair and brain parts over the ceiling, are also exactly as they were five years ago. It is believed they were blown up by their leader after expressing doubts during the siege.

Now rotting and unsafe, the main school building was recently closed off. Many in Beslan want the gym preserved as a chapel and the rest of the building razed – an option some grieving mothers like Susanna Dudiyeva bitterly oppose. The strong-willed head of the Beslan Mothers’ Committee, a group of relatives of the dead set up to press the government into properly investigating the massacre, Dudiyeva lost her 13-year-old son, Zaur, in the siege. “For me, every year becomes harder because the more time passes, the more I think of how my dead son would have been now,” said Dudiyeva, 48. “The building should be made safe and preserved as a memorial to the dead, to stop the world from forgetting.”

Her husband, Elbrus, who until September 1, 2004 was a successful local businessman, has not worked since his son’s death. Last year he suffered a stroke. “This is a deeply traumatised town, where many men turned to the bottle after the tragedy because they couldn’t cope with the



guilt and the feeling they'd failed their dead children. It will never be a normal place. I can't come to terms with my son's death. That's why I will fight to the end for the truth," said Dudiyeva, who is one of a small group to have filed a case against the Russian government at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. The state, they argue, is to blame for allowing the attack to happen and failing to enter into proper negotiations with the terrorists to save more children.

A similar case is being brought by Voice of Beslan, a rival group of mothers that split from the Beslan Mother's Committee. Its head, Ella Kesayeva, whose sister lost both sons and her husband in the terrorist attack, once nearly came to blows with Dudiyeva during a heated row about whether or not they should accept an invitation to sit down with Vladimir Putin, the former president and current prime minister.

Russian authorities built two new schools to rehouse the children from School No 1, but in an ill-judged move, one was erected only a few hundred yards away, in full view of the destroyed old school, its spectral silhouette weighing on the minds of former hostages across the road. One is Karina Kusova, 12, who cannot bear to look at the building. Five years ago, she left home to go to school for the first time. Her cousin Albert, 19, was with her. Karina was severely burnt in the siege. She spent two months in hospital, was operated

on three times and is now severely scarred along her left leg and waist. She needs a new skin graft, but her parents can't afford the operation in Moscow. "All I remember is running away with Albert after the explosions," recalls Karina, who still has shrapnel in her foot. "I was scorched and in agony. As we fled Albert was shot in the head. He fell and had blood gushing out of his eye. I was crying and screaming at him to get up." He died five days later in hospital.

As she speaks, Karina is visibly uncomfortable. She sighs heavily, blushes, and gives her mother, Larissa, hesitant looks as the woman explains that, despite the passing of five years, Karina still wakes up screaming at night, curled up like an animal, so terrified she briefly fails to recognise

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her mother. They live in a cramped house where Karina uses an internal phone to call her mother in the kitchen from the living room to be sure she is in the house. Karina says she has nightmares of the terrorists and has imagined finding a severed leg in her bed. She suffers excruciating headaches, but has yet to undergo a proper scan. Her mother gave up her job to look after Karina, as the school often called to tell her that her daughter



was agitated and needed to be picked up.

For a while Karina received some help from professional psychologists who descended on Beslan after the tragedy, but the sessions appear to have been of little long-term help. By contrast, Bert Kusov seems to have made an almost full recovery. He was seven when he went to school with his grandmother on the day of the siege. He has not forgotten the searing thirst and taste of urine, nor the bloody image of the terrorists dragging the body of Ruslan Betrosov — the man executed in front of the hostages and his own two boys — across the gym floor. He also remembers well the chaos and screaming that followed the explosions and the moment he saw his dead grandmother by his side, covered in blood and debris. "For three days she kept telling me not to worry, that everything would be fine," said Bert. "Suddenly there was shooting everywhere and I ran as fast as I could, but then felt something smash into me." Bert was hit by two bullets: one to his leg, the second through his arm, but he was saved by rescuers. Two of his closest friends died in the school. Now 12, Bert is a keen, talented wrestler. He does well in school and wants to be a doctor. The nightmares have become far less frequent. His mother, Tamara, says he'll still only sleep in the same bed as his parents, however.

Aida Sidakova also appears to have overcome her ordeal. Now 12, she was caught in the siege with her mother and grandfather. When the explosions went off, she was helped out of the gym, but then instinctively climbed back in to be with her mother, only minutes before the roof caved in and flames engulfed the hostages. She was shot but survived. Although shy, she now acts like any ordinary 12-year-old girl ➤ 51

but will only talk about Beslan in monosyllables.

Like all other badly wounded hostages, Bert and Karina were awarded £1,000 each from the state and £16,000 each by an aid fund, which gathered donations sent to Beslan from Russian and foreign charities. The fund made one-off payments and was run by the local government. Less than a year after the tragedy, when most donations ceased, it had received about £25m, according to an official audit ordered by the local audit chamber and prosecutors' office, after locals expressed fears that money had been stolen. The audit failed to uncover large-scale fraud. The fund was closed about a year after the tragedy when it finished paying out the money it had received.

Rumours that aid money was siphoned off by unscrupulous bureaucrats still persist, however, fuelled by the 2006 murder of the head of a bank that received some of the victims' funds. The man had expressed an interest in investigating claims that funds were misappropriated, and was killed on the orders of the bank's deputy head, a woman who had stolen £4,000 from the bank's coffers.

The state paid for Karina's three operations, as they were urgent. Many children still need medical or psychological help, or both. But getting it now the Russian authorities have long ceased to pay attention to Beslan's problem is much harder. Incredibly, a central and co-ordinated rehabilitation programme was never set up. "Now that the money has dried up, I don't feel like asking anyone for help," says Karina's mother, Larisa. "To those who did not suffer in the siege we are now a pain in the neck, while those who lost a child hate us, deep down, because our girl survived."

Families who lost a loved one in the siege received £2,000 as compensation from the state and £23,000 from the nongovernmental fund for each relative killed, a sizable sum by local stand-

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ards. But in many cases the money was a source of tension and recrimination. Teachers who set up their own small fund to gather private donations were unfairly accused of stealing money by bereaved parents twisted with grief, who also criticised one another for the various ways in which they spent their compensation, with some accusing others of cashing in on their dead child.

Since 2004, international charities have invited many of Beslan's young on trips abroad. While welcome by most, the free vacations have at times also caused tension among the victims' families, with some children going abroad many times and others not once — often because parents are too proud to apply. The state has spent £11m on a new high-tech hospital, built near the cemetery. Now almost complete, it promises to be North Ossetia's best hospital, but is still not open.

52 "In some cases grief brought people together, but

in many it divided them," says Zarema Koroyeva, who runs a small rehabilitation centre for children, built mainly with funds from a German charity. The place takes in 20 children at a time for brief holidays, during which they spend time drawing, playing music and acting. It took three years to build and has been open for less than two, but is already at risk of closing down unless the local authorities agree to finance it.

"There have been divisions between those who lost someone and those who did not, as well as conflicts between the bereaved about who is to blame, compensation and how people spent it, what to do with the school building, the teachers and the work of the Beslan Mothers' Committee. But, with time, people's positions have softened."

Survivors' guilt, says Koroyeva, has poisoned the town's psyche. Parents are persecuted by a sense they betrayed their dead children; the young who lived must come to terms with the deaths of their siblings and friends as well as the overpowering personality cult they left behind. Some parents unwittingly demonstrate more love for their dead child than for those who survived.

Unlike their parents, most children rarely talk about the siege. Georgy Murtazov, a sensitive 11-year-old boy I met at the centre run by Koroyeva who lost his mother, says discussing the attack makes it worse. He remembers blood and dead bodies and guts spilling onto the gym floor but does not recall being scared, he says. But as soon as he talks of his mother he begins to stutter.

"I don't have any memories of her, just her picture to stop me from forgetting her face," he said. "I don't like going to the cemetery, but when I am there I put my hand on her tomb and think of her." Georgy's father recently remarried and the boy now lives with a stepbrother, Vitaly. Georgy does not know that Vitaly was also a hostage, a

sign of how little the siege is discussed at home.

Tensions and division aside, the people of Beslan have shown remarkable resilience, dignity and self-restraint. Fears that the town's grief would spark a bloody revenge spree against neighbouring Ingushetia, a region North Ossetia fought a brief but fierce ethnic war with in 1992, did not come true. This despite the fact that more than half of the terrorists were from Ingushetia and that the people of Beslan blame their old foe more than Chechnya for their suffering.

In five years, 47 new children have been born into families directly affected by the tragedy. Elena and Yuri Zamesov have had three boys since the death of their 12-year-old daughter, Natalia, and their son Igor who was 10. On September 1, 2004, they had wanted to take their two-year-old brother, Kyrill, to school with them, but luckily their mother kept him at home and he survived. In all,



Above: Karina Kusova, 12, who was severely burnt in the massacre

Right: Elena Zamesov with her new family; she lost a son and daughter

nine children and one adult died in her street.

Two months after they buried their children, the Zamesovs were told the remains were so badly charred there had been a mix-up. Instead of Igor, they had buried another boy. The body had to be exhumed for DNA tests, which confirmed the mistake, and the distraught family buried their son a second time. "I thought many times of killing myself," says Elena, 37. "What kept me alive is my religious belief that suicide is a sin. If I sinned, I'd end up in hell and would not be with my dead children. My small son, Kyrill, was also of help. I soon understood that the only way for us to face the future was to have more children."

Large portraits of Natalia and Igor, both in school uniform, hang in the kitchen and living room. Their favourite toys and books are laid out on their desks in what used to be their room. Elena wears a small ring that came with chewing gum her daughter bought. She tells her children their dead siblings always watch over them.

Elena says she once dreamt of being reunited with Natalia at the cemetery, and the girl told her that she was being allowed home. The next day, Elena found out she was pregnant, and took the dream as a sign that her dead daughter's soul had returned in the body of one of her little brothers.

"Having other children has given us some joy and distraction, but in no way diminished my pain. They say time heals. Truth is it gets only worse. I go insane when I imagine what they went through in those three days. Only people who've lost a child can truly understand us."

The Kulov family also feels there is an otherworldly bond between their son Oleg, who was eight when he burnt to death in the gym, and the two children they have had since, especially his three-year-old sister, Angelina. Oleg was caught in the siege with his brother, Alan, then 11. They spent most of the siege together, often recalling a Black Sea holiday they had been on, and dream-



ing of cold drinks. Alan was very badly wounded in the ensuing explosions and gun battle. He spent four months in hospital and later underwent nine hours of brain surgery in Germany, paid for by the Red Cross, to remove shrapnel. His father found Oleg in a morgue, identifying his charred remains only by a small cross he wore.

For two years, Zhanna, 42, the boys' mother, would only leave home to visit the cemetery. She received some counselling, but at night would be seized by terrifying fits in which she screamed she wanted to die to join her son. "Oleg came to me in my dreams while I was pregnant," she says. "He was bandaged up and asked me to buy him a dress. I did, and now his sister wears it. I look at her and think Oleg is still with us." Her husband, Igor, still sleeps in Alan's room to reassure him, though the boy now rarely has nightmares.

Their strong religious faith made some parents especially vulnerable. Last year, a Russian court gave an 11-year sentence for fraud to Grigory Grabovoi, a cult leader who claimed to have the power to resurrect some of Beslan's children, a claim some desperate mothers readily believed.

A wild rumour, a premonition, a dream, is all it takes in Beslan for mass panic to break out. In May, a woman at the market told people she had visions of a second mass hostage-taking. Guards

at the new school opposite "No 1", as locals refer to the old one, decided to carry out a safety drill, but the alarm went off before teachers and pupils were warned. Worse, camouflaged security forces with guns and dogs came to search the building for explosives. Mass hysteria erupted. Frantic parents raced to the school — which last spring had no electricity for two months owing to lack of funds and now has only two working phones.

Most families of the dead are angry at the authorities' apparent unwillingness to properly investigate the terrorist attack. Five years on, they're still waiting for the prosecutors' inquiry to reach a conclusion. It has been postponed 30 times. A lengthy parliamentary probe published three years ago was widely dismissed as a whitewash by Beslan people because it failed to blame the Russian government in any way.

In 2005, Nur-Pashi Kulayev, an unemployed carpenter from Chechnya and the only terrorist caught alive, was sentenced to life. Some of the terrorists are thought to have escaped. A court case against three senior police officers accused of negligence ended with an amnesty without them giving evidence in public. Not a single Russian state official resigned or was sacked as

a result of Russia's worst-ever terrorist attack. Secret interior-ministry documents that have emerged since the siege show that two weeks before the attack, security forces warned of an imminent mass hostage-taking by Chechen terrorists. A subsequent urgent directive called for security at schools in the area to be increased.

Why, many families of the victims ask, were both warnings ignored? Why did the Russians fail to negotiate at once with the terrorists? "Who is to blame for the death of so many children?" says Dudiyeva of the Beslan Mothers' Committee, which on the first anniversary of the tragedy had a three-hour meeting with President Putin — which Voice of Beslan's Ella Kesayeva refused to attend. "We want to know what could have been done to save them. We want the truth. Putin seemed truly moved when we met him. He promised to get to the bottom of it and to punish those responsible, but he has done nothing. He has no honour."

Many share Dudiyeva's criticism of Putin, who visited Beslan for a few hours the night the siege ended, but has never visited the memorial at the school gym. By contrast, others like Kaspolat Ramonov argue the former president did all he could to save the town's children. The former customs officer lost his daughter, Marianna, 15, in the siege. His son, who now wants to be an anti-terrorism officer, was shot twice, but survived.

After his daughter's death, Ramonov kept watch over her tomb day and night. Three years ago he became the cemetery's official caretaker. He knows the story of each victim buried there. If a mother needs to leave town for a few days, he will talk over her child's tomb. "'Don't worry,' I say, 'Your mum will be back soon and she's thinking of you,'" says Ramonov. "This is not a job," he adds. "I live here to look after the children."

On my last day in Beslan, I visit the school gym with Milana Adirkhayeva. She is with her elder sister, Emilia, 12, and their father, Alan. The girls only sleep with the light on, and like most children held hostage in Beslan, they're scared of thunder. They occasionally still have nightmares involving violence. As the sisters place red carnations by the cross in the gym, Alan shows me a letter Emilia wrote and sent to him at work last year. "Dedicated to Mama Ira. Four years have passed but we have not forgotten you," she wrote. "Your smile, eyes and tender voice will be in our hearts for ever. We'll never find someone as intelligent, beautiful and gentle as you. Everyone loved you, Mummy, and you are an angel for everyone. Don't be sad. I know for sure that one day we'll all be together again, we'll embrace and live together until we die..." Before signing off, she turned her attention to those most in Beslan still hold responsible for their terrible pain — their Ingush neighbours across the border nearby. "The Ingush did not want to understand how difficult it was for you to die so early. So let the Ingush be killed by Russians, just like they killed our Beslan." ■