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Investigation Says Russians Acted Ineptly in School Raid

By [STEVEN LEE MYERS](#)

MOSCOW, Nov. 29 - The first government investigation to announce its findings on the terrorist attack on School No. 1 in the southern Russian city of Beslan in September 2004 criticized law enforcement agencies for a confused and uncoordinated rescue effort and blamed them for allowing the attack in the first place, a lawmaker who led the inquiry said Tuesday.

The investigation - carried out by a commission appointed by the regional legislature - did not corroborate the official versions of some key events during the convulsion of violence that ended the siege on Sept. 3, though it also cast doubt on alternative theories that had been fueled by rumor and outrage over the government's actions.

The commission's written report, which totals 40 pages, according to the lawmaker's spokeswoman, has not yet been made public but was summarized by its chairman, Stanislav M. Kesayev, during a legislative session in Vladikavkaz, the capital of the North Ossetia region.

While the investigation added few new details about the storming of the school, which left 331 hostages dead, more than half of them schoolchildren, the commission's findings amounted to a rare official rebuke of the federal authorities for their actions during the attack.

"Without any doubt the school seizure in Beslan was the result of insufficient measures by law enforcement bodies," Mr. Kesayev told his fellow legislators, the Interfax news agency reported. "Among other faults, law enforcement bodies did not do enough to stop a large number of armed people from reaching Beslan, a major rail and air hub, unnoticed."

The investigation failed to establish "with absolute conviction" that a bomb wired by the gunmen who seized the school had accidentally exploded, touching off more explosions and a frantic attempt to rescue the hostages inside, as Russian federal officials have asserted. Mr. Kesayev cited inconsistent reports from different agencies for the inability to resolve the question.

At the same time, he said, there were "no grounds" to believe that a sniper's bullet - fired by forces outside the school - had set off the explosion, even as he diplomatically acknowledged that victims'

relatives continued to doubt the official account.

Mr. Kesayev said that those held responsible for negligence should be punished and that the agencies should be reorganized to prevent future incidents like the one at Beslan.

There was no immediate response by federal officials, but President [Vladimir V. Putin](#) and others have shown little willingness to acknowledge errors in the rescue attempt, laying blame on the man who claimed responsibility for the siege, Shamil Basayev, a leader of secessionist rebels in the nearby region of Chechnya.

North Ossetia's investigation is one of three under way. [Russia's](#) prosecutor general is overseeing a criminal inquiry that is to continue at least until March, officials announced Tuesday.

A federal parliamentary inquiry, led by the vice chairman of the upper house, Aleksandr P. Torshin, is expected to be released by year's end.

Fatima S. Khabalova, a spokeswoman for the North Ossetian legislature, said in a telephone interview that the commission's findings would be revised to include lawmakers' questions on Tuesday and submitted to Mr. Torshin's committee.

In particular, Mr. Kesayev's report criticized officials' misstatements of the number of hostages in the school, which sowed distrust among frantic relatives and contributed to a botched rescue effort.

The investigation also knocked down another widely held suspicion: that the Interior Ministry and the Federal Security Service knew of the attack in advance and did nothing to stop it.

In one intriguing disclosure, Mr. Kesayev was asked why negotiations with the Chechen separatist political leader, Aslan Maskhadov, had not begun until 28 hours after the siege began on Sept. 1. He replied that North Ossetian authorities had made "numerous attempts to establish contact with Maskhadov, but failed."

Officials reached Mr. Maskhadov's envoy in Britain, but their effort became moot when the violence erupted. Mr. Maskhadov was later reported to have said he would have gone to Beslan to mediate a peaceful end. He was killed by Russian forces in March of this year.

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