

Gas in Moscow hostage raid killed 117

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MOSCOW — The gas used by Russian commandos in their assault on a Moscow theater killed all but one of the 118 hostages who have perished so far, Russian health officials said Sunday night.

And the death toll, they said, was bound to rise.

Nearly 650 poisoned hostages remained hospitalized Sunday night. Moscow's chief physician, Andrei Seltsovsky, said 150 of the hostages were still in intensive care, 45 of them on the critical list.

Russian officials initially said 69 hostages had been killed, and they insisted that none of the deaths were caused by the gas.

As the death toll continued to rise Sunday, anguished families waited in bitter cold and a steady rain, pressing against the wrought-iron gates of Clinical Hospital No. 13, desperate for news about daughters, wives, sons and husbands.

A U.S. embassy official said an American woman and a U.S. green-card holder had finally been located in local hospitals, although he gave no personal details. Consular officials continued to search for at least one other American believed to have been a hostage.

A group of 54 Chechen militants, 50 of whom were killed in the siege, had taken over the theater on Wednesday night. Their single ransom demand was the immediate

withdrawal of Russian troops from Chechnya.

Then in a pre-dawn raid Saturday morning, Russian troopers pumped the gas into the theater before storming it. The rebels apparently shot and killed just one hostage as the commandos moved in.

There were numerous, unverified reports of semi-conscious hostages having choked to death on their own vomit inside the theater due to the gas attack. Health officials said Sunday that most had died in various hospitals from respiratory distress and heart attacks.

Russian officials refused Sunday to specify the exact name of the gas. Foreign diplomats have demanded information about the gas from the

government, but without reply.

A physician involved in treating the hostages called the gas "a general anesthetic." He said heavy doses could cause "unconsciousness, respiration and blood-circulation problems."

The gas was powerful and fast-acting enough that the rebels — including 18 Chechen women who had explosives wired to their bodies — were unable to detonate the numerous bombs and mines they had placed around the theater.

One hostage described the gas as bluish-gray, and another said it was bitter-smelling. The Interfax news agency quoted an unnamed hostage as saying he saw one of the militants trying to put on a gas mask as the

siege unfolded.

"He made several convulsive moves, trying to pull the mask over his face, and fell," the source said.

He also described how a fellow hostage, a teacher, had pressed wet napkins to her students' mouths during the ordeal.

"She kept the napkins that way until she lost consciousness," he said. "She saved the children."

President Vladimir Putin declared Monday a national day of mourning, with flags to be flown at half-staff. Putin also asked TV networks, radio stations and cultural centers to cancel their entertainment programs.

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Bush fails to rally support for Iraq war at summit

Bob Deans

Cox News Service

PHOENIX — After a lackluster weekend of diplomacy on his Iraq policy, George W. Bush begins a critical period for his presidency Monday with a pair of domestic and international events unfolding over the coming weeks that will shape the remainder of his term.

During two days at the annual Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, Bush did not receive a single public endorsement to aid his push for a U.N. ultimatum that Iraq give up its most dangerous weapons or face attack. A vote on a U.S.-backed resolution before the United Nations Security Council could come as early as this week.

Bush returned to the United States on Sunday afternoon for a campaign event in Arizona and will

spend Monday campaigning for Republican candidates in New Mexico and Colorado. It is part of a national barnstorming tour meant to help the GOP cling to its razor-thin majority in the House, and perhaps regain control of the Senate, in the Nov. 5 elections.

The outcome will have a decisive impact on the prospects for Bush's domestic proposals, from a second round of tax cuts to the creation of a new homeland security department.

Republicans are slightly favored to hold the House, though an upset can't be ruled out. The Senate is too close to call, particularly after incumbent candidate Sen. Paul Wellstone, D-Minn., was killed in Friday's aircraft crash.

There's also much riding on Bush's efforts to rally international support for an ultimatum that Iraq

surrender its most dangerous weapons or face U.S.-led attack.

While Bush misses no opportunity to assert his intention to act alone against Baghdad, if he must, doing so would mark a complicated and potentially perilous turn, particularly if it comes to war and things go badly.

A weekend of meetings with leaders from China, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Mexico, Singapore and more than a dozen other Asia-Pacific countries produced little for Bush in that area. Bush had hoped to use the weekend to lobby Russian President Vladimir Putin on Iraq, but Putin canceled his trip to remain in Moscow to monitor the hostage crisis at a theater there.

Perhaps most telling was the pointed refusal of his host, Mexican President Vicente Fox, to embrace Bush's proposal for a U.N. resolution

calling for tough new weapons inspections for Iraq, backed by the threat of U.S.-led force.

"We have listened to the United States and we are listening to others," Fox told reporters, with Bush seated beside him.

"We want a strong resolution that leads quickly to new inspections and ensures Iraqi compliance, but a resolution that is satisfactory to all in the U.N.," said Fox, once one of Bush's most vocal supporters among foreign leaders.

When Bush first sought the resolution during a speech at U.N. headquarters Sept. 12, he said he expected the body to act in "weeks, not months." Seven weeks later, it's nearing time to call a vote, or call the whole thing off.


"This is a very key week coming up," Secretary of State Colin Powell told reporters. "We have to make a

few fundamental decisions," he said. "We can't continue to have a debate that never ends."

Following the APEC summit, there would seem to be little reason for Bush to press for a Security Council vote on Iraq a week before midterm congressional elections, unless he's certain of getting it passed.

That would lend Bush's approach to Iraq the international legitimacy conferred upon the war his father, former President George H.W. Bush, waged against Iraq a decade ago.

Rejection at the United Nations, on the other hand, would sting, undercutting Bush's claims of world support and generating public unease over the prospect going it alone, or very nearly so, against Baghdad. Neither would bode well for Republicans a week from now.



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