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## Putin Lashes Out at the U.S.

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President Vladimir Putin accused the United States of undermining Russia's struggle against terror by meeting with Chechen separatists and rejected calls for a public inquiry into whether authorities mishandled the hostage-taking in Beslan.

Putin told a group of Western policy analysts Monday night that his administration has repeatedly complained about meetings between U.S. officials and representatives of Chechen separatists, but to no avail.

Washington has invariably responded with "we will get back to you" or "we reserve the right to talk with anyone we want," Putin told the group during a wide-ranging policy discussion at his residence outside Moscow, according to CNN's account of the meeting.

The president often looked grim but spoke calmly, participants said.

Putin said Washington's approach reflects a Cold War mentality among some U.S. politicians. He said negotiations between Moscow and Chechen separatists would be like negotiations between the West and al-Qaida, said Guardian reporter Jonathan Steel, who attended the 3 1/2-hour meeting.

"Why don't you meet Osama bin Laden, invite him to Brussels or to the White House and engage in talks, ask him what he wants and give it to him so he leaves you in peace? Why don't you do that?" Putin said, according to The Guardian.

"You find it possible to set some limitations in your dealings with these bastards, so why should we talk to people who are child-killers?" he said, Reuters reported.

Putin's comments shed further light on who he had in mind Saturday when he lashed out at those who assist terrorist efforts to "tear off a big chunk of our country" because they "think that Russia, as one of the greatest nuclear powers of the world, is still a threat, and this threat has to be eliminated." Putin was speaking in a televised address to the nation.

Moscow has criticized a decision by a U.S. court to grant asylum to Ilyas Akhmadov, foreign minister in the rebel government.

Putin reportedly bears a personal grudge against British Prime Minister Tony Blair for a British court's refusal to hand over Akhmad Zakayev, envoy to Chechen rebel leader Aslan Maskhadov. Denmark earlier refused to extradite Zakayev as well.

Putin said Monday night that the terrorists' goal was to ignite clashes between Ossetians and the Ingush to try to destabilize the entire North Caucasus region.

"There's a Yugoslavia variant here," Putin warned, according to notes taken by participant Eileen O'Connor, The Washington Post reported. "It would be difficult to imagine the consequences for the rest of the world. Bear in mind Russia is a nuclear power."

While ruling out negotiations, Putin also flatly rejected calls for a public inquiry into Beslan -- despite the fact that flaws in the command and control of federal forces deployed to tackle the crisis were clear as television broadcast footage of chaos Friday.

Moreover, Putin dismissed an inquiry by parliament, which has the right to conduct independent investigations, saying it could become "a political show."

"If that happened, it would not be very productive," Putin was quoted by The Guardian as saying.

In previous mishandled crises, like the Kursk submarine sinking, Putin waited for an official investigation or internal probe to determine who was at fault in mishandled crises and then fired them.

In the case of Beslan, there will be an internal inquiry "to establish the chronicle of events and find out who is responsible and might be punished," Putin said.

The president made it clear, however, that he does not fault the crisis headquarters for deciding to storm the school after two bombs exploded inside and the terrorists started firing at fleeing hostages.

He praised the courage of the commandos who went in, knowing that many would be killed. A record 10 elite troops died, many in civilian fire, as they tried to shield fleeing children, according to The Washington Post.

Putin revealed that security officers on the scene had intercepted radio exchanges among the terrorists. He read

out an exchange: "What are you doing? Why? I hear some noise. What's going on? I'm just in the middle of shooting some children."

"They were bored, so they shot children," Putin said, according to The Guardian.

Federal Security Service deputy director Vladimir Pronichev led the crisis headquarters, Gazeta reported. Pronichev had the same role during the Dubrovka hostage crisis in 2002, when commandos managed to kill all the hostage-takers before they could detonate their explosives.

This time, however, lack of organization and flaws in command and control were obvious on the ground.

It remains unclear, for example, why local vigilantes were allowed to man the one and only security perimeter, allowing them to open fire and charge toward the school ahead of commandoes trained to storm buildings and take out hostage-takers.

Putin insisted that he saw no link between Beslan and the situation in Chechnya, striking the table with the side of his right hand to make the point. He conceded that federal forces have committed human rights violations in Chechnya, but like the torture by U.S. soldiers in Iraq, they were not sanctioned from the top, The Guardian reported.

"In war there are ugly processes that have their own logic," he said.

"Just imagine that people who shoot children in the back came to power anywhere on our planet. Just ask yourself that, and you will have no more questions about our policy in Chechnya," he said.

Putin said the Kremlin will continue to push ahead with a plan to transfer more authority to the pro-Moscow Chechen administration.

"We will strengthen law enforcement by staffing the police with Chechens, and gradually withdraw our troops to barracks, and leave as small a contingent as we feel necessary, just like the U.S. does in California and Texas," he said.

While focusing on Beslan and terrorism, Putin also said he will implement his vision of democracy in Russia.

"We'll do this at our own pace," he said, according to CNN.

"In Russia, democracy is who shouts the loudest," he said. "In the U.S., it's who has the most money."

■ NATO and Russia on Tuesday agreed to boost cooperation in the fight against terrorism after a spate of attacks on Russian soil, Reuters reported.

■ Putin on Tuesday decided to postpone his visit later this week to Germany because of the Beslan hostage-taking, the Kremlin press service said.