

And still they grieve...

One year on from the Beslan siege, a new school building can't hide the scars. Education International's Charlie Lennon reports.

A new cemetery has been opened in the past year to accommodate the more than 300 victims of the siege in School No.1 in Beslan. It is a remarkable sight. Its walls are festooned with a mixture of large colourful plastic wreaths and real flowers, and the grave of every victim is bedecked with flowers and some with toys and other mementos.

It is a stark reminder of the scale of the tragedy that beset the people in this remote corner of the Russian Federation a year ago.

The cemetery is not the quiet place one might expect. It is filled with the sound of construction machinery as workers toil to create a lasting monument of red and grey marble to those who are buried there.

The noise of cement mixers could not drown out the wailing sounds of a grieving grandmother as she visited the graves of her daughter and her granddaughter.

The presence of the many grave plots that contain more than one family member—sisters, brothers, mother and daughter or son, grandmother and grandchild, in one case six children from one family—is a poignant reminder that this was a school serving a small community.

While Beslan is a small town, at the edge of the city of Vladikavkaz, it is now busy with the activity of major building projects that will provide three of the most modern and well-equipped schools in the Russian Federation.

Nonetheless, the newly appointed

There is a sense of numbness here. The enormity of what happened is almost too great to grasp.

Prime Minister of the Republic maintains that one of the most difficult issues to deal with is the psychological trauma suffered by the children. He has sought assistance with providing counselling and other

strategies to help the people, and particularly the children, to deal with post-traumatic stress.

Those affected by the tragedy have received some compensation from the state, and many foreign aid agencies and charitable institutions have provided assistance. Some are continuing to help. There are, however, many children with uncertain futures. A three-year old girl has lost all of her family except her grandmother. Families have lost the main breadwinner, who may have been a teacher in the school or one of those teachers visiting the school, on that fateful September day in 2004.

School remains

A visit to the site of School No.1 is the closest that one can come to an understanding of the ordeal suffered by those caught up in the siege.

From a distance the outline of the school is the same as that of many schools in the rest of Europe. Drawing nearer, however, one can see that the

roof is missing from the gym and the blackened remains of the roof beams glisten against the blue sky. There are broken windows and bullet holes. Roof tiles on parts of the main school building have also been smashed by large calibre bullets or rockets.

The gym, which held almost 1,400 hostages, is a surprisingly small building. It appears large enough for not more than a quarter of that number.

The floor is littered with plastic bottles containing water. These are maintained by relatives of the victims as a reminder that the hostages were deprived of water by their captors. Most of the bottles contain at least a single flower.

The basketball hoop from which hung the bomb that ultimately exploded and led to the panic among the hostages and the subsequent carnage is still clearly visible. The floor

...many of the children will continue to need special support throughout their education.

is still marked with the residue of the blood of victims. The door through which many of the victims sought vainly to escape in their panic is open; the killing ground beyond overgrown with new grass.

A small child's shoe, discarded in the rush to escape, sits surrounded by flowers on a windowsill of the gym, a moving reminder of the age of many of the victims of the violence in this place.

There is a sense of numbness here. The enormity of what happened is almost too great to grasp.

A school reborn

The joy of a school community celebrating the start of a new academic year, like many others, schools in the Northern Hemisphere at the beginning of September, has

Main photo (left): The graves of six children from one family in the new Beslan cemetery. **Right:** EI President Thulas Nxesi at the Beslan commemoration ceremony with Galina Merkoulova, chairperson of the Russian teachers' federation, and representatives of the Ossetia branch.



been shattered by unspeakable and inexplicable violence. Societies like to view their schools as safe nurturing environments, not places of execution and bombs and bullets and terrorism.

The scars of this tragedy may never heal for those who were present during the siege and survived. Most of the teachers and students from School No.1 opted to remain together and transfer to School No.2 when they returned to school.

There they offer each other the support that only those who have shared experiences of such an event can offer their fellow sufferers. They have prepared a poster of all of the teachers who died, including the former administrator of the school who was visiting on that fateful day.

They are all still clearly traumatised by the events and in need of support. It is likely that many of the children will continue to need special support throughout their education and some may need psychiatric assistance for many years after.

The community is vigorously debating what should be done with the old school. Some want it retained forever as a reminder of the terrible events which took place there. Others want it razed and replaced with a suitable memorial on the site.

The reality is that the buildings have been badly damaged and some steps will have to be taken to prevent their

decay. Other evidence of the siege, such as the stains and marks of the violence, will fade with time. Perhaps in a year or two those involved will view the situation differently.

Other relatives of the victims are expressing their anger on the streets. They demonstrated in the centre of the city, some on hunger strike, seeking publication of the official report into the tragedy.

On the September 3 anniversary a major commemorative event took place in Beslan. Among the ceremonies, the regional authorities opened the new cemetery formally as a monument to those who died. Education International President, Thulas Nxesi participated in the ceremonies.

A visit to the Beslan community in the aftermath of this tragedy is a deeply moving experience. It is a tribute to the resilience of the human spirit that people who experience such extraordinary events can rebuild their lives. However, it is clear that for many of the people of that school community the tragedy is still part of their daily lives and will be for a long time to come. n

CHARLIE LENNON is Education International's Chief Administrative Co-ordinator. This is an edited extract of a report from Lennon's visit to Beslan in June 2005. For more information visit www.ei-ie.org