

INTERVIEW-Afghan woman rights campaigner wins courage award

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By Avril Ormsby

LONDON, Oct 7 (Reuters) - She has been called Afghanistan's bravest woman, defying the Taliban and the warlords in a tireless campaign for women's rights and the victims of rape.

Malalai Joya's bravery was recognised this week when she was named as the second winner of the Anna Politkovskaya award -- in memory of the campaigning Russian journalist murdered two years ago in Moscow.

"She lives a life of courage and truth-telling in the face of grave danger, as Anna did," said Mariana Katzarova of RAW in War, a human rights group focused on stopping violence against women in conflict situations, which presents the annual prize.

Katzarova, a Bulgarian who created the award after spending 15 years working in Bosnia, Kosovo and Chechnya, praised the 30-year-old Joya for her campaigning for women and against those she considers war criminals.

Joya herself is softly spoken as she describes the numerous assassination attempts she has survived and the death threats she receives for doing her work.

There is a stark contrast between the smart Western clothes she wears for interviews in London before receiving the award, and her description of the dangers she faces at home.

"I went to my home town and a bridge was bombed," she said. "My house and office have been attacked. Day by day my life is getting riskier."

She has received insulting e-mails and telephone calls, and travels with armed guards, wearing a burqa to conceal her identity, she said.

"I am moved from house to house on a daily basis."

Only a baby when Soviet tanks rolled into Kabul in 1979 at the start of the decade-long occupation, Joya has been surrounded by danger virtually all her life.

Her family fled when she was four, first to the refugee camps of Iran and then to Pakistan, before returning to Afghanistan in 1998 during the Taliban era.

She secretly taught girls to read and write, risking the wrath of the Taliban who banned education for girls under their austere interpretation of Islamic law.

TALIBAN OVERTHROW

Joya continued to stand up for women's rights after the U.S.-led overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, challenging the warlords by demanding they be brought to justice for crimes against civilians.

In her mid-20s she became the youngest elected member of the Afghan parliament, but was barred after she criticised fellow members in a 2007 television interview in which she compared the assembly to a "stable or zoo".

Joya is pessimistic about Afghanistan's future.

Conditions have in some ways grown worse for women, and are "like hell" outside Kabul, with an increase in reported cases of rape among young girls, some as young as four or five, she said.

She also criticises U.S. bombing raids which have killed large numbers of civilians and is critical of the Afghan government for wanting to negotiate with the Taliban insurgents.

Joya said she could not see the conflict between the NATO-backed government in Kabul and the Taliban ending soon, and said the United States and its allies were following their own agendas in Afghanistan.

"They want an excuse to stay here," she said, without giving details. (Editing by Tim Pearce)

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