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A CONVERSATION ON GLOBAL ISSUES WITH DAVID IGNATIUS AND FAREED ZAKARIA



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Maria Cristina Caballero was Director of Investigations at Semana, Colombia's main weekly news magazine, from (1998-2001). Previously she was also editor of investigations at Cambio news-magazine and El Tiempo, Colombia's main daily paper. [more »](#)

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Today's Movers (March 12):

United States **Iran**

The Force of Anna Politkovskaya's Legacy

While the world celebrates the International Women's Day, I thought that one of the best ways to honor women's courage would be to write about Anna's legacy.

I was as deeply honored as sad to be recently asked by the Harvard's Kennedy School Women Leadership Board to accept the "Blue Ribbon Award for Peace" given posthumously to my colleague, Anna Politkovskaya. I certainly believe that she was, and still is, a twin soul. This regarding our strong view of journalism as public service, and as a potential force toward change. Although Anna was shot to death on October 7th, she will definitely continue being a bright source of strength and inspiration for me -- and for many around the globe who strongly believe that the powerful should be held accountable.

Anna brilliantly told the stories of Russian regions confronting conflict. Through her eyes and words, the world learned details about tragedies such as the one going on in Chechnya: "... Living streets full of dead eyes. Mad and half-mad people. Streets teeming with weapons. Mines everywhere. Permanent explosions. Despair..." This is precisely a description of the ruins of the Chechen capital, Grozny, written by Anna in July of 2000. "In Hell", was the title of the article.

Perhaps it is not a coincidence that those same words, though, could describe the tragedy that a number of warring regions of Colombia, my country, have been living for four-decades. In 1997/1998 I wrote a series about the cruel massacres committed by the illegal counter-guerrilla factions, known in Colombia as paramilitaries.

In Mapiripán, one of the towns where massacres were committed, more than 50 people were cut in pieces with machetes while being alive, and until they died. Sadly, I personally saw body parts being buried in the local cemetery, and interviewed terrorized survivors who bravely provided me important clues. The title of my series by coincidence also used the word hell: "Mapiripán, a Shortcut to hell." This past January, Salvatore Mancuso -- a top paramilitary commander who surrendered in the context of a national peace process--, confessed that this massacre was committed in conjunction with a Colonel of the Colombian Army Forces, and with the alleged help of members of the Colombian Air Force.

I suddenly had to live Colombia because of death threats that I received in 1999, which exact origin I couldn't determine for a number of years because I have been exposing a variety of cases of corruption and human rights abuses. I was surprised, though, when Humberto Usategui -- a Colombian Army General who was also judicially processed because of this massacre -- told El Espectador (one of Colombia's most traditional media) that I had had to leave Colombia because of my investigations on the massacre of Mapiripán. I indeed revealed evidence of the coalition between some military officials and paramilitary members to commit this particular massacre. But it was a surprise to me that General Usategui seemed to know much more than I did about the story behind the threats that forced me to leave.

Anna and I once discussed about the many hells that we had had to enter to be able to report about distant wars tragically fueled by corruption. "... To be an investigative journalist in a country in conflict like ours you definitely have to take risks... There is no other way to get the real stories", frequently pointed out Anna. And I totally agreed.

Her striking descriptions related with the multiple causes and the human rights' consequences of a war, could be considered universal. Unfortunately, indeed, many countries in conflict in every continent -- too many -- are living similar tragedies.

I had the opportunity to meet Anna through Women Waging Peace, an initiative launched by the Harvard University Kennedy School's Women and Public Policy program, WAPP, in 1999. When WAPP invited women working toward peace from different continents, Anna and I had the opportunity to talk about the challenges of exposing corruption and human rights abuses, with the hope of generating

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change.

Since I read about Anna's death, I have had flashbacks. I can see her severe glasses and her full head of desorganized hair while emphasizing that journalists simply had a duty to report on the subject that mattered, just as singers had to sing and doctors had to heal. She certainly, though, went beyond that. Her impressive articles could be considered a monument to good journalism. They are not only full of data that she got by exposing her life, but with detailed descriptions or context, as well as in depth analysis.

Anna mainly wanted to help her fellow Russian people. She tirelessly reported from the wrecked villages and shattered towns of Chechnya, talking to those on all sides of the conflict. Anna interviewed dozens of soldiers' mothers trying to find their sons' corpses in military morgues where mangled bodies lay with no identification at all. And she talked to Chechens whose friends and relatives had disappeared into so-called "filtration camps" to be tortured, mutilated, raped, killed.

As the magazine *The Economist* pointed out once, Anna also loathed the warlords who had misruled Chechnya during its brief spells of semi-independence; the Islamic extremists who exploited the conflict; the Russian goons and generals, and their local collaborators.

Anna emphatically despised the Chechen authorities installed by Russia: they looted reconstruction money, she pointed out more than once, "using torture and kidnapping as a weapon." According to her editors, she was due to file a story on this issue the day she was killed in the elevator of her apartment building.

Her last known article? *Novaya Gazeta*, an independent paper, published on September 28 Anna's condemnation of pro-Kremlin militias operating in Chechnya as part of Moscow's so-called Chechenisation policy.

Anna's book entitled "Putin's Russia: Life in a Failing Democracy" described Russia as a country where human rights are continuously violated, and where the President is outrageously abusing power.

It might be just an unfortunate coincidence that Anna was murdered on Vladimir Putin's, Russia's president, birthday. Why didn't he even refer to her death until four days later? Why did he finally decide to refer to Anna insisting that the influence of her work was "minimal"?

As Vitaly Yaroshevsky, one of her editors, told international press agencies, "Everything she wrote was on the edge." Anna was certainly known for the intensity of her views.

I remember that Anna and I discussed about how important it is to give voice to those many voiceless people on the verge of desperation who are practically trapped in real-life hells. We both felt that those people surviving against all odds in the midst of such adverse circumstances are the real heroes.

When Anna told me that she had written about Chechens who have known nothing but their sub-machine guns and the woods, I mentioned that by coincidence I had interviewed some Colombian guerrilla members whose grandparents and parents were also guerrilla members. They had been born in a guerrilla camp and had received training to use arms since they were four years old.

In some Colombian rural regions the children indeed have more access to gun than to books. In the case of the guerrilla members that I interviewed, they said that they didn't have access to any standard or traditional toy. They learned to count by counting bullets.

Anna and I talked about the patterns of causes and consequences of violence that seem to apply to many countries in conflict. In this regard, as a conclusion of her article on the traumatized hostages who died in the Russian theater -- known as the tragedy of Nord-Ost--, she pointed out: "... The option is that we will finally realize that the more excessive the force we use, the more bloodshed, victims and humiliation in Chechnya, the more people will want to avenge it, no matter what the price might be. More people will be recruited into groups of those who want to die for revenge.

Since this war will not take place on a battlefield, but next door, and will affect the people who have nothing to do with it -- all of us, in fact -- this means that we are all doomed to a new Nord-Ost. It means that no one will ever feel safe, either in his or her apartment or outside. Cornered people will continue to come up with more intricate schemes of revenge."

Isn't this conclusion of Anna applicable to other countries in conflict? Isn't it applicable in Iraq?

Premonitions. Anna told me once that she had had bad premonitions and nightmares seeing her dead body. I told her that I have had those nightmares, too. "What if they just decide to shoot us?," she asked.

Unfortunately, in the case of Anna, those bad premonitions have become a reality. As Anna said while attending a conference on the freedom of press organized by Reporters Without Borders in Vienna in December 2005: "People sometimes pay with their lives for saying aloud what they think."

I feel lucky to be alive but part of me died with Anna. "Say a prayer for me", she used to say. Those who admire her courageous work could say a prayer for Anna, too, for a better future for Russia, and all the countries hurt by corruption and wars.

Anna, who left behind a daughter and a son, told *The Guardian*, a London paper, in 2004: "...I want to be able to live the life of a human being, where every individual is respected, in my lifetime."

Sadly, it is not to be. But it is our work to carry forward. Isn't it?

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POSTED BY MARIA CRISTINA CABALLERO ON MARCH 8, 2007 3:26 PM

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