

★ Anna Politkovskaya, Russia

## Disquiet On The Chechen Front



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Anna Politkovskaya, a correspondent for the Moscow biweekly *Novaya Gazeta*, was in Los Angeles last October, picking out her dress for a media awards ceremony, when some staggering news came from Moscow: Chechen terrorists were holding 850 hostages in a theater. The Russian authorities tried to send in negotiators, but the Chechens refused to see most of them. They asked for Politkovskaya.

And so Politkovskaya rushed back to cover yet another episode of one of the world's nastiest and longest wars, which this time had shifted to Moscow. The terrorists, she says, "wanted someone who would accurately report things as they were. My work in Chechnya makes people there feel that I don't lie. But there wasn't much I could do for the hostages anyway." She carried water and fruit juice to them, and reported their dejection and feelings of doom to the world. Two days later, Russian Special Forces stormed and gassed the

mighty pen: Politkovskaya braves the hell of Chechnya to get the truth theater, killing 41 terrorists and 129 hostages.

Politkovskaya, 44, made her name by writing detailed, accurate and vivid reports on the plight of the civilian population in Chechnya, caught in the horrors of war since 1994. She tells stories of people who are taken from their homes at night and never come back; about extrajudicial executions; about the hungry refugees in cold and damp camps. "It was the refugee problem that started it," she now recalls. When the second Chechen war began in 1999, tens of thousands of refugees began flooding the makeshift relief camps. "It was horrible to stand among the refugees in the field in October 1999, and see cruise missiles flying over your head," she recalls.

When those missiles hit a market in Grozny, it was only prompt coverage by journalists like Politkovskaya that forced the Russian commanders to let ambulances in and refugees out. "Our work is a lever to help people as much as we can," she believes. But it also causes trouble. In February 2000, the FSB (the former KGB) arrested Politkovskaya in the Vedeno district of Chechnya. They kept her in a pit for three days without food or water. "It was important not to let them kill me on the first day," she says. A year later, a Russian officer whose war crimes Politkovskaya had exposed threatened to kill her. *Novaya Gazeta* had to hide her in Austria for a while. The officer is now awaiting trial on charges of war crimes committed in Chechnya that Politkovskaya was the first to report. "But I don't feel victorious," she says. "I only feel that we're all involved in a great tragedy."

Her editors have had to stand up to pressure from the Kremlin, which is often infuriated by her reporting. *Novaya Gazeta* balances on the brink of forcible closure. "Well, it goes with the job," she shrugs. Politkovskaya has long since learned to keep her anxieties in check. As she arranges yet another trip to Chechnya, she may now be too famous to be targeted by the FSB. But she really doesn't think about such things. "If you don't have the strength to control your emotions, you're of no help to the people who are in such shock and pain. You only add to their burden," she says.