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Marie Colvin, reporter killed in Syria, was targeted by army, lawsuit alleges

Court documents contain a statement from a former Syrian intelligence officer who said that when Colvin's death was confirmed, a Syrian army official exclaimed: "Marie Colvin was a dog and now she's dead."



Colvin was reporting on the Syrian government's bombing of residential areas when she was killed by a rocket attack on a media centre. (IVOR PRICKETT / AFP/GETTY IMAGES)

By **DEB RIECHMANN** The Associated Press
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WASHINGTON—Syria President Bashar Assad's forces targeted veteran war correspondent Marie Colvin and then celebrated after they learned their rockets had killed her, according to a sworn statement a former Syrian intelligence officer made in a wrongful-death suit filed by her relatives.

New court documents unsealed Monday include the statement by the officer, who has defected from the war-ravaged nation. The intelligence defector, code-named Ulysses, provides a detailed account of how Assad's military and intelligence officials sought to capture or kill journalists and media activists in Homs, a centre of the pro-democratic revolution that erupted across Syria in the spring of 2011.

He said that when Colvin's death was confirmed, Syrian Maj. Gen. Rafiq Shahadah exclaimed: "Marie Colvin was a dog and now she's dead. Let the Americans help her now."

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At that time, Shahadah was a security official in Homs. He now runs the Syrian military intelligence directorate.

The Syrian government has not responded to the lawsuit, but Assad has denied that his forces targeted and killed Colvin in 2012 to silence her reporting on the conflict. The 56-year-old New York City native was reporting on the Syrian government's bombing of residential areas when she was killed by a rocket attack on a media centre.

The defector's identity and allegations contained in his affidavit could not be independently verified by The Associated Press, but his account is corroborated by Syrian government documents filed as evidence in the case.

The defector said that as an intelligence officer he reviewed intelligence and surveillance reports, arrest orders and field reports during 2011 and 2012 from around the country. He said he was privy to open and secure communications broadcast over hand-held radios issued to him and all other intelligence officers. The defector currently lives legally in Europe because he fears he is wanted by Syrian intelligence officials.

His deposition includes a flow chart identifying eight Syrian officials who were involved in the attack on the media centre where Colvin was killed. The defector said the eight include Assad's brother, Maher, who leads the army's elite 4th Armoured Division. He claims Assad's brother gave one of the eight officials a new, black Hyundai Genesis as "a reward for the successful operation" against the media centre in Baba Amr, a working-class neighbourhood of Homs.

The Center for Justice and Accountability, based in San Francisco, filed the wrongful death suit against Assad in 2016 on behalf of Colvin's relatives, including her sister, Cathleen. The new court records became public after being unsealed by U.S. District Judge Amy Berman Jackson.

The defector's account is consistent with another deposition in the case from Annouar Nouar, a former Algerian member of an Arab League observer team. He said a deputy Syrian defence minister told him that "the media was his main problem" and that Baba Amr could be destroyed in 10 minutes if there were no video cameras. Nouar said the deputy defence minister referred to The Washington Post and New York Times as "terrorist newspapers."

"The actual maliciousness that the Syrian regime had against Western reporters and their Syrian counterparts and sources is on display through multiple witnesses and multiple documents," said Scott Gilmore, an attorney for the plaintiffs.

By the end of 2011, the lawsuit said, Syrian forces had encircled Baba Amr with checkpoints, tanks and artillery. After learning that Western journalists were arriving in Baba Amr from Lebanon, Syrian forces were ordered to intercept their communications, track their movements and locate their media centre so they could be captured or killed, according to the lawsuit.

The Syrian forces used a mobile satellite interception device that could tap broadcast signals and locate their origin, the lawsuit said. Still, Syrian forces were not able to locate the media centre, which was on the ground floor of a three-story apartment building. The journalists were using a clandestine satellite and proxy internet services to mask their location.

Colvin, a correspondent for the British newspaper, The Sunday Times, and photographer Paul Conroy sneaked into Homs through an underground water tunnel. In Baba Amr, they toured a field hospital and a cellar called the “widow’s basement” where mostly women and children sought shelter from the bombs. They fled through the same tunnel and filed a story, which was published on Feb. 19, 2012.

The next day, the two returned to the media centre where they witnessed even heavier shelling that kept them from fleeing. They stayed and on Feb. 21, 2012, Colvin gave live interviews over the media centre’s satellite link to the BBC and CNN. Syrian forces were “shelling with impunity and a merciless disregard for the civilians who simply cannot escape,” she said.

That day, an informant told Syrian intelligence officers the location of the media centre. That corresponded with information the intelligence officers had obtained from their satellite interception device, which had pinpointed that same location as the place where Colvin did her broadcast interviews with the BBC and CNN, the lawsuit said.

At about 9:30 a.m. on Feb. 22, 2012, the centre was destroyed by several rockets. Colvin and French photographer Remi Ochlik were killed and several other people were injured.

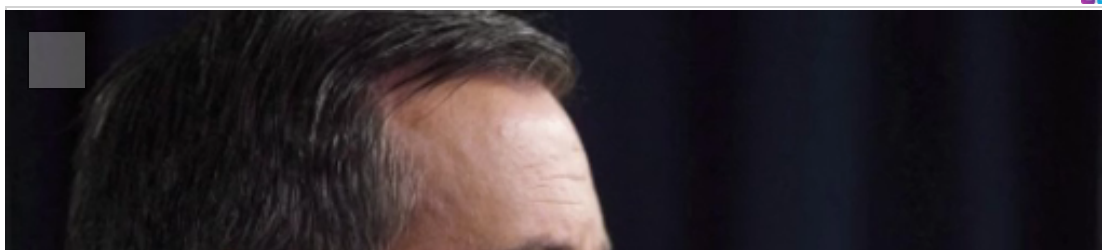
Colvin had years of experience in war zones. She covered conflicts in Chechnya, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe, East Timor and Sri Lanka where she lost the sight in her left eye in a blast. The black patch she wore over her eye became her trademark.

Her sister is seeking an undetermined amount for the emotional pain of losing her sister, compensatory damages for her three children, who are beneficiaries of Colvin’s estate, and punitive damages against the Syrian government.

So far, the Syrian government has not filed any response to the lawsuit.

“Their only response in this case is an interview Assad gave to NBC the week the suit was filed,” Gilmore said. “He issued first a blanket denial, and then stated that Marie had entered the country illegally, worked with terrorists and was responsible for everything that befell her.”

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