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To the Judges:

Al-Qaida is the best-known and most-feared face of terrorism in our times, and yet an image persists of a disorganized, loosely linked group that the U.S. government has described as on the wane.

Rukmini Callimachi shattered that myth with her discovery and exploration of one of the biggest troves of internal documents from the terror organization ever to be made public – an invaluable contribution to our understanding of who and what al-Qaida really is today, and indeed of the nature of terrorism itself.

She did so at great risk to her own safety.

After French forces drove al-Qaida fighters out of Timbuktu, Mali, early this year, Callimachi, West Africa bureau chief for The Associated Press, was one of the first reporters to arrive in the storied city. She had taken a little-known 13-hour desert route, chased by extremists for 20 minutes at one point along the way.

Despite al-Qaida's reputation in the region for kidnapping foreigners, Callimachi canvassed territory where al-Qaida fighters had been just days earlier and stayed at a hotel later attacked by jihadists. Her persistence resulted in stories suffused with a strong sense for the people and place of Timbuktu, especially a marvelous piece about a young woman who dared to fall in love even while other couples were being stoned.

Callimachi's courage paid off when she found thousands of pages of al-Qaida documents strewn across the floor and dumped into the trash at 10 buildings formerly occupied by fighters in Timbuktu. Then began the painstaking process of sifting through the pages, piecing together their order and deciphering what they meant, with the help of seven translators who untangled the dense Arabic. Callimachi sent documents to at least three experts for authentication and made them available online in Arabic and English, to enthusiastic response.

"I can't thank you enough for the trouble you're taking to bring these documents to light," wrote Brookings Institution fellow William McCants. "They are immensely helpful in understanding al-Qaida's inner workings."

One of the few known letters between al-Qaida commanders laid out the terror group's strategy for the entire region. U.S. Sen. Chris Coons called it one of the most illuminating documents he had ever read on Africa. Another letter, in which al-Qaida leaders chide a

terrorist for not filing expenses, drew thousands of tweets and responses. The New York Times Magazine called it "an extraordinary and revealing letter." The Independent dubbed it "brilliant," and in a sign of its impact on the popular imagination, it became a question on the popular NPR quiz program, "Wait Wait ... Don't Tell Me!"

Beyond the documents, Callimachi recognized a devastating side effect of the al-Qaida invasion of Mali - a backlash by the country's military against light-skinned Arab and Tuaregs who looked like the jihadists. So she meticulously tracked down the bodies of six victims shot by the military, bringing terrified family members to the gravesites to identify them.

As Callimachi documented these human rights violations, Malian soldiers harassed her repeatedly at her hotel. On one trip out of the desert, the army waved down her car at gunpoint. The very next day, she went back.

Callimachi's story about finding the graves was written in the first person, with a great sensitivity to tone. It had enormous impact. The Malian government threatened to shut down a website that ran it, leading to a rebuke from the U.S. State Department. After an intimidating phone call, the AP evacuated a staff member in Mali to avoid possible retaliation. Eventually, the Malian government was forced to declare an investigation into the killings.

Investigators at the International Criminal Court and the United Nations have contacted Callimachi about human rights abuses in Mali, and her reporting has been brought to the attention of the U.S. Congress.

New Yorker writer Jon Lee Anderson, in a tweet, called it an "evocative, sad piece ... by the impressive Rukmini Callimachi." Priya Kale, one of scores of readers who responded, wrote, "this is one of the most powerful, bone-chilling and remarkable pieces of journalism I've ever read." United Nations envoy Robert Piper called it "amazing" and "extraordinary."

Most importantly, the families of the victims were profuse in their gratitude.

"Because of your courage, what you were willing to do, we finally know the truth," wrote Mohamed Ould Ali, the son of one of the men killed. "It shone a big light. A light on what happened ... And there is no one that denies it anymore."

For her groundbreaking work in the critical area of terrorism, her deep courage and her unwavering dedication, we are very proud to nominate Rukmini Callimachi for the Pulitzer Prize for reporting on international affairs.

Sincerely,



Kathleen Carroll

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