

WITNESS, from page 8

the death of Colvin, he was asked to appear on a panel to discuss the arms trade in the House of Commons, alongside human rights activists and a representative from the Russian Federation.

"I didn't know the protocol too well," says Conroy. "So I said, 'can I ask a person on the panel [the Russian representative] a question,' and they said 'yes'. I said, 'it's a three part question, with just yes or no answers... Are you aware that the Russia is supplying the Syrian regime with heavy weapons and munitions?' and he said, 'yes'. And I said, 'are you aware that the Syrian regime is using heavy weapons and munitions against the Syrian people, civilians?' And he said yes. 'Does Russia have any intention in stopping the supply of heavy weapons and munitions to be used against the Syrian people?' And he said 'no.' And he thought for a second and said, 'if we don't do it, someone else will'. It's kind of what a drug dealer would say really."

The situation in Syria is dire with evidence emerging lately of war crimes. Indeed, recent samples smuggled back from Syria to both Britain and France, tested positive for the Sarin - suggesting that the regime has deployed chemical weapons. A potent nerve agent, Sarin causes a violent and painful death. President Obama previously said that any use of chemical weapons by the regime would be a 'game changer'. However, in an interview with the BBC, Conroy accused the west of hypocrisy.

He said: "It's almost saying that for three years it's kind of legitimate to use heavy explosives, battlefield weapons, missiles, rockets ... on civilians, but please don't use chemical weapons? Death is death whether it's brought about by a red hot piece of shrapnel or a piece of gas ... There's no difference.

"It's hypocritical at this point. The only reason that we're involved now that chemical weapons have been found is that they might leave Syria and be used against us."

Whilst Conroy's book deals with the heaviest of topics he manages to interweave lighter moments and a certain gallows humour.

"Ninety percent of the time," he explains, "apart from when tragedy strikes, it's just funny. You look at yourself in these ridiculous situations and you have to laugh, thinking, 'what the hell are we doing.'"

Indeed, Conroy and Colvin first met through one of those more ridiculous incidents. "Ah, the boat episode," Conroy says with a mischievous laugh, "one of my finer moments."

In the weeks before the Iraq war started

in 2003, Conroy was one of 20 members of a western press corps waiting in a small town on the Syrian side of the Iraqi border, all desperate to get into northern Iraq to cover the allied forces invasion. Weeks went by as the group were repeatedly denied visas to cross the border, and their hopes began to fade.

"It was as I watched the lifeblood begin to drain from the journalists gathered in the Petroleum Hotel, that the idea of the boat was born."

And so, with the innertubes of lorry tires, rope, wood and some netting, Conroy and two accomplices built a raft with which they hoped to sail down the Tigris River and into Iraq.

"The invasion of Iraq had already begun, and we knew we were taking a serious risk by travelling illegally into a fully-fledged war zone on a homemade boat."

Unluckily (or perhaps the reverse), the vessel never set sail on her maiden journey, as Conroy and his co-conspirators were caught by Syria's notorious Security Services.

Once released, Conroy was the pariah of the press corps who feared his nautical exploits had destroyed their chances of ever being allowed passage into Iraq.

"I skulked in my room, smoked and read the instruction manuals for my camera because I had no books ... After two nights, I made a rare foray into the restaurant in search of anyone willing to talk to a pariah

journalist. No luck. My presence was met with icy stares.

Suddenly, the restaurant door burst open and there stood Marie Colvin. She cast her head around the room and shouted to the gathered journalists, 'Who and where is the boat builder?' ... 'I am,' I replied meekly. Marie strode over to my table and stuck out her hand. 'Marie Colvin,' she said in her inimitable American accent. 'Good to finally meet someone with some balls round here. You like boats then, eh?'"

That night, a friendship was born that would later see them both go through hell.

"There was something about the two of us, it worked for us and it worked for the paper... half of the time we didn't even need to speak, we'd just look at each other and give a little nod and it was like, 'let's go.'"

Conroy's first taste of battlefield journalism was as a filmmaker in the Balkans during the late 1990s. Astonishingly, he describes the situation then as comparatively 'easy.'

"In the Balkans days, it was quite easy really, to cross the front line, with just a carton of cigarettes or a bottle of scotch or the local hooch, you could generally talk your way through the front line. You certainly never felt that you were a target.

"Since Libya and the Arab spring, everyone is now so media aware e... The information game has become a really big part of war... (in Libya) I would have never dreamt of trying to cross through the battle

lines from rebel-held to government-held areas; the same in Syria."

Indeed, Conroy and Colvin entered Syria fully aware that the Assad regime had allegedly issued orders that any western journalists caught should be shot on site, and their bodies tossed onto the battlefield, to make it appear they'd been caught in the cross-fire.

During his escape from Homs, an injured Conroy came painfully close to falling into the hands of the Syrian regime. With Marie dead, and a hole blasted through his leg, he spent six days lying in a makeshift field hospital in Baba Amr, under constant bombardment.

On the third day, the shelling suddenly stopped. A temporary cease-fire had been agreed, and Conroy was informed that ambulances from the Syrian Red Crescent (SRC) were making their way into the city of Homs to collect him, and the injured French journalist, Edith Bouvier.

Their brief euphoria was shattered, however, when an SRC Medic took Conroy to one side and confessed the real plan. He told Conroy: "At the checkpoint in Baba Amr, they have a state television crew. The idea is to film us being put into Red Cross ambulances and then, when we drive out of Homs ... We are to be executed. Our bodies are to be put on the road and the government would then announce that the FSA ambushed us and murdered us."

With the SRC ambulances mere Trojan horses, Conroy had no choice but to flee to Lebanon through the storm-tunnel once more, aided by FSA rebels. The dramatic story of his escape is beyond even the most vivid of Hollywood scriptwriters' imaginations; it makes "The Shawshank Redemption" look easy. There are times when the situation seems so dangerous, his health so precarious; you have to remind yourself that he survived to write the book.

In spite of everything he's been through, Conroy insists that he would go back:

"I remember the night before Marie was killed. We sat there and the shelling was advancing and she just looked at me and said, 'Paul, if you weren't being paid, would you still be here?' and I said 'of course I would'

"I think at the heart of it for everyone that does that it, (is) the desire to tell stories, but stories that count... we just happen to tell the extreme stories of people with no voice, and without that presence, there just wouldn't be the knowledge that this is happening."

From the Street News Service, a news collaboration of the International Network of Street Papers.



REUTERS/ZOHRA BENSEMRA

Girls queue to buy bread at the only bakery serving the outskirts of Idlib province on Aug. 1, 2012.

SALTZMAN, from page 3

is like beating a dead horse.

D.S.: That's a good characterization. It is like beating a dead horse. I don't think there's going to be anything new under the sun that isn't going to be challenged very vigorously by the Oregon Law Center or the ACLU. On the other hand, you're going to have the business community try unsuccessfully to get something done in Salem that would have given cities more permissive authority. I don't see anything happening to really change the status quo. I don't want to take away from what Mayor Hales has up his sleeve, but that's how I see the situation.

A.W.: A really memorable moment for me happened a couple years ago after the sit lie ordinance was declared unconstitutional. Then mayor Sam Adams and Commissioner Fish went in front of the Portland Business Alliance (PBA) and basically told them to get over it. Is that pretty much your attitude?

D.S.: Yes. The PBA is obviously less focused on the legal side of things and the First Amendment side of things than they

are on the complaints they get. They can't accept that there's nothing that can be done about it.

A.W.: There was an effort to create a program, modeled after one in Eugene, where homeless people would be allowed to camp in their cars, in parking lots of agreeing businesses and churches, but efforts to get it off the ground fizzled. Do you think it could work here?

D.S.: I thought it was a good idea. In practice, it hasn't panned out. The church in Westmoreland had a very unfortunate set of circumstances. Given that it worked in Eugene, you would think that it would work here. Others in this building were disappointed that it seemed to unravel.

A.W.: Would you be willing to find other sites or negotiate a compromise to make it work?

D.S.: My position right now would be that if a faith-based organization, like a church or another group has an idea of how they want to do this and they approach us, that is what I would be looking for us. Approach us do their homework so they can go in with their eyes wide open.

A.W.: In the past, you have been fairly outspoken against the existence of Right 2 Dream Too. If they were in full compliance of code, would you support letting them stay there?

D.S.: We're still being sued by Right To Dream Too, so I'm not supposed to comment on that. [Editor's Note: The City of Portland has a policy that its employees, including city commissioners not comment on pending litigation]

A.W.: Northwest Pilot Project and other organizations have been charting the decline in availability of low-income and affordable housing over the last few decades. There are a variety of issues about costs of construction, the recession, making a project pencil out despite subsidies, but what do you think can be done to increase the stock again?

D.S.: We can play a big role there in either helping construction come on line but preserving existing buildings. The program to make sure that we acquire buildings with long-term Section 8 contracts has largely been successful under Commissioner Fish's leadership. But there are going to be other opportunities.

A.W.: What opportunities are you thinking of?

D.S.: I'm thinking of opportunities to assist in renovation or the purchase of existing housing stock. I think we need to be opportunistic about stepping into purchase, and hopefully increase the availability of affordable housing.

A.W.: With the 30-percent tax increment set aside decreasing gradually, what other resources or funding streams would you like to see become available?

D.S.: TIF, while looking like it's on a death spiral, there are circumstances that could change that outlook.

A.W.: Like what?

D.S.: There is the educational urban renewal area that has not reached its full potential yet. There could even be the desire of council to create an additional urban renewal area, or two. I couldn't tell you where those would go at this point. But we've done it in the past.