
OPEN LETTER

PROTECTING TRANSLATORS
AND INTERPRETERS WORLDWIDE



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June 2015

His Holiness, Pope Francis
Palazzo Apostólico
00120 Città del Vaticano

A Call to Action: Protecting Translators and Interpreters at Risk

Your Holiness,

Civilian translators and interpreters are in the crosshairs of state and non-state actors around the globe. Recruited for dangerous assignments yet unprotected by the law, they are hunted down and killed by insurgents, tortured by military regimes, as well as prosecuted and imprisoned even in free-world nations. Tragically, these are the very people who bridge cultures in times of war and peace, and enable communication across countries and continents.

To combat this critical state of affairs, Red T, a non-profit advocacy for translators and interpreters in high-risk settings, and the four major international language associations – the International Association of Conference Interpreters, the International Federation of Translators, the International Association of Professional Translators and Interpreters, and Critical Link International – respectfully ask that you join us in raising awareness for our most vulnerable colleagues. By adding the strength of your voice to the efforts of the international language community, Your Holiness would draw the attention of governments, relevant bodies, and the public at large to the terrible fate of so many linguists.

The situations they face are many and varied. For instance, in Afghanistan, Ajmal Naqshbandi was working as an interpreter for Italian journalist Daniele Mastrogiacomo when both were abducted. The Italian government negotiated and the journalist was freed; however, the Taliban considered their demands not fully met and beheaded the interpreter. In Iraq, the British military lost 21 interpreters in 21 days, 17 of them in a mass killing targeting interpreters. Since these two wars began, over 1,000 linguists have lost their lives and many more have been injured, whether in the course of serving militaries and journalists or in the wake of troop withdrawals.

In the Central African Republic, extremists have been committing crimes against Bible translators, ranging from burglary to aggravated assault and homicide. In Uganda, a court interpreter working at the Kampala bombing trial received death threats by text and is said to now be in hiding. China sentenced a Uyghur translator to 11 years in prison for inciting Uyghur separatism because he translated Chinese-language news that the Chinese government considered subversive; the Iranian regime incarcerated translators for exercising their right to freedom of expression; and the United States prosecuted linguists for what we believe to be largely political reasons.

In a speech he delivered on behalf of journalists in conflict situations at the May 27th UN Security Council Open Debate, H.E. Archbishop Bernardito C. Auza, Apostolic Nuncio and Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations, called for a comprehensive reexamination of “the current rights and protections of journalists in conflict situations, to see if they are still adequate, or whether more specific protection measures for journalists are needed,” especially in instances of asymmetrical warfare.

Unlike journalists, however, translators and interpreters are not specifically mentioned in the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols; in fact, linguists are not covered by any international legal text. Similarly, government policies often fail to address their needs and criminal justice mechanisms can be woefully inadequate. The same holds true for asylum programs to resettle endangered conflict zone interpreters and their families. While some nations are truly welcoming and process visa applications quickly, others allow a sluggish bureaucracy to stand in the way, and interpreters have been injured or murdered while waiting. Indeed, the promises of a safe haven at times have proven dangerously hollow.

The above language organizations, representing over 80,000 linguists worldwide, second the sentiments expressed so powerfully by H.E. the Apostolic Nuncio in the interest of journalists and hope the same support can be extended to the linguists who assist them and others in their work.

We therefore urge your Holiness to also advocate for translators and interpreters, the cultural intermediaries who are less visible than journalists but who remain targets long after the press has left. Specifically, we ask for your support of a “U.N. Resolution for the Protection of Civilian Translators/Interpreters in Conflict Situations,” a draft of which has been prepared by the aforementioned five organizations. Together, we can achieve greater recognition and protection of translators and interpreters at risk.

Sincerely,

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President, Red T

Linda Fitchett
Chair, AIIC Conflict Zone Interpreters

Henry Liu
President, FIT

Aurora Humarán
President, IAPTI

Angela Sasso
President, Critical Link International

Cc: H.E. Archbishop Bernardito Auza
Apostolic Nuncio and Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations