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OPEN LETTER

PROTECTING TRANSLATORS AND INTERPRETERS WORLDWIDE



aiic.org
Geneva

November 2022

H.E. Mr. Volker Türk
UN High Commissioner for Human Rights
Palais des Nations
CH-1211 Geneva 10
Switzerland



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Paris

Re: UN Database Capturing Human Rights Violations of Translators and Interpreters

Your Excellency,

On behalf of the world language community, the undersigned international translator and interpreter associations, together with academic and human rights organizations, urgently call your attention to the ongoing violation of the human rights of translators and interpreters (T/Is) across the globe.



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Buenos Aires

By bridging language barriers and fostering communication, T/Is provide critical assistance to governments, non-governmental organizations, the media and other entities. In essence, they create multilingual spaces where the fundamental right to speak and be heard in one's own language is upheld for all. As such, they are defending the right to freedom of expression as laid down in Art. 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, as recent conflicts and sites of political unrest have made tragically clear, linguists in such high-risk settings have become priority targets of state and non-state actors alike, who view them as traitors, spies or subversives and imprison, abduct, torture and murder them with impunity. In fact, the simple practice of their profession makes them vulnerable to the loss of life, limb and liberty.



criticallink.org
Vancouver

Unfortunately, there is no central database that aggregates the casualty figures of this largely invisible, highly endangered population. Some governments collapse T/Is into civilian contractor statistics, while others are tightlipped about disclosing figures or fail to collect them. And the press compounds T/I invisibility by subsuming them as media workers. Accordingly, one is compelled to tease out anecdotal evidence from open sources.



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Red T and its partners have worked to raise awareness of T/I persecutions in many arenas, among them the United Nations. For instance, since 2017, we have been co-organizing #ProtectLinguists events at UN headquarters in New York City. To cite one, in the context of UN Humanitarian Week in 2019, Red T had the privilege of co-hosting a panel discussion with the Permanent Missions of Spain and the Republic of Fiji as well as the UN Department of Safety and Security to alert member states to the lack of a protection mechanism for T/Is in high-risk settings.



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We are currently exploring possibilities for further action inside the UN. Recognizing your Office's unique mandate, we are turning to you for support and guidance on how best to respond to T/I human rights violations. We believe, as a foundational step and as mentioned previously, there is a pressing need for data; this could take the form of a UN database that compiles evidence of T/I human rights violations. Such a database would promote greater accountability among member states and encourage them to meet their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law. It would also be instrumental in formulating future legislation and policies protective of T/Is and go a long way in bringing justice to T/I victims and their families.



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The undersigned recognize the effort and resources required to accomplish the above and are committed to contributing in any way deemed necessary.



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Buenos Aires

We very much appreciate your time and consideration and look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,



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Maya Hess, President, Red T
Jennifer Fearnside-Bitsios, President, International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC)
Linda Fitchett, Chair, AIIC Conflict Zone Group
Alison Rodriguez, President, International Federation of Translators (FIT)
Aurora Humarán, President, International Association of Professional Translators and Interpreters (IAPTI)
Angela Sasso, President, Critical Link International (CLI)
Christopher Stone, President, World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI)
Bart Defrancq, President, Conférence Internationale Permanente d'Instituts Universitaires de Traducteurs et Interprètes (CIUTI)
Sue-Ann Harding, President, and Cristina Marinetti, Chair of the Executive Council, International Association of Translation and Intercultural Studies (IATIS)
Lucio Bagnulo, Head of Translation and Language Strategy, Language Resource Centre, International Secretariat, Amnesty International
Sunil Varghese, Policy Director, International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP)
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