Still fighting for those interpreters left behind

The AIIC Interpreters in Conflict Zones Project in 2018 – speaking out for local interpreters abandoned after troop withdrawals.

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It has been four years since troop withdrawals from Afghanistan and Iraq concluded in 2014, yet not a single country has brought to safety all the local interpreters who called for sanctuary. This despite ongoing reports in the press about the threats to them and their families, deteriorating security conditions in both those countries, and distressing news of numerous interpreters who wander helpless as refugees in Europe and elsewhere.

The AIIC Interpreters in Conflict Zones Project (ICZ) continues to speak for these abandoned interpreters, organising meetings and trying to convince governments of their duty to protect them. We also keep a watchful eye on other cases of persecuted translators and interpreters worldwide.

Spring was busy this year, with three important meetings held in the European Parliament, the UNNY and the UK House of Lords. All these meetings were held in the name of the coalition to help translators and interpreters at risk, which has been built over the years together with Red T, FIT, IAPTI, WASLI and CLI.[1]

European Parliament

The first meeting in the European Parliament, at the end of January, was well attended and MEPs made commitments— to take our cause to a plenary session, for example— but so far these have not been met. We’ll have to keep up the momentum there this autumn. For more on this meeting, read the report on the event I published in February.
Sadly, our colleague Silvia Camilo — a key instigator of the approach to the European Parliament — died later after a brave battle with illness. She will be sorely missed by all of us who knew her.

United Nations

The second meeting was in April, at the UN in New York. Here New York-based Red T took the organisational lead, including making many of the necessary contacts, and having a poster and banner designed. Organising these meetings is no easy business.

The Belarus delegation to the UN—which, together with FIT, was instrumental in getting September 30th recognised last year by the UN as International Translation Day—acted as our sponsor in the UN.

This first exploratory meeting was well attended, but not, unfortunately, by other UN delegations. However, first steps are important and we all know that the UN works in mysterious ways – often quite slowly – so this autumn we are again working to get more support for an international protective text for translators and interpreters worldwide. A draft resolution has been ready for some time as a basis for debate and we are determined to see a text adopted in the UN, as soon as possible. We are very tenacious! The coalition has recently sent letters to all UN ambassadors calling for a UN resolution. We encourage you—and your friends and family—to further this cause by signing and sharing the petition supporting a UN resolution. I have also sent out a template to all AIIC regional officers: this can be used by groups and individual members to write letters to their UN ambassadors, calling for support. We would be very grateful if as many of you as possible could do so.

UK Parliament — House of Lords

Thirdly, on 21 May, we held a meeting in the House of Lords, as guests of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages (APPGML) and its co-chair Baroness Coussins, who is also a Vice President of the Chartered Institute of Linguists.
The UK Parliament’s Select Committees had already held two hearings on the subject of the interpreters who had worked for UK troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, many of whom had been refused visas to safety. Those interpreters admitted into the UK had been under threat of deportation as their visas expire after five years and cost a fortune to extend. However, earlier in the month the Government had decided to relax the deportation policy and our aim was to further improve UK policy towards its former local interpreters.

The meeting prompted, the following day, several questions to the Government from Lord Alton.

Coincidentally, the Defence Select Committee finally published its report condemning the government's implementation of a scheme set up to help those local interpreters under threat of reprisals because of their work, pointing out that in reality the scheme had not helped a single person.

Despite some positive moves, the UK is still reluctant to help interpreters even if they served for several years, such as the case of an Afghan interpreter who, having served the British army between 2008 and 2011, was refused a visa to relocate to the UK and is sleeping on the streets of Athens.

Such cases raise questions about the terms of contracts issued to local staff. Many governments use recruitment agencies or defence contractors to hire local people, and it is apparent that the contracts do not take into account the specific needs of local staff in difficult times, including post-employment. Governments often base their decisions to grant protective visas on statements taken directly from the contractor’s files – such as the reasons for termination of service or comments on character or behaviour, which may not coincide with evaluations by their actual military employers. Proper government scrutiny of outsourced contracts and more attention to their own military evaluations of local staff could prevent bad decisions.

The Government’s replies to Lord Alton’s questions were not greatly encouraging, although there has been a positive shift in policy since the meeting. We are still awaiting a reply to our letter to the UK ambassador to the UN, sent this summer when the UK was chairing the Security Council. We hope our recent letters to all the ambassadors will move the UN towards adopting a protective resolution for all endangered interpreters in areas of conflict.

**Campaigning, campaigning, campaigning**
Alongside these meetings, we had several other speaking engagements. These included, in May, a conference on Language, Translation and Migration at the University of Warwick, England. The coalition regularly sends letters to governments to encourage them to help their former helpers in conflict zones or, as part of its broader mandate, asks for the release of persecuted and imprisoned translators worldwide. We also write articles for various publications.

We put much energy into maintaining contact with other people and bodies working on similar projects. Two of these — who respectively fight for the interpreters left behind by France, and who provide assistance to former local staff who have reached Germany — joined us in our meeting with the European Parliament. I encourage you to give them your support – they can both be found on Facebook: Association des interprètes afghans de l'Armée Française and Patenschaftsnetzwerk Afghanische Ortskräfte. And the International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP) joined us at the UNNY meeting. We thank them and all others who give us their support.

While you’re on Facebook, be sure to follow the AICI project to help interpreters in conflict zones.

There are many other groups around the world, often launched by former soldiers or lawyers as well as individuals who lend their services voluntarily to help the abandoned interpreters and others who helped NATO forces abroad. Do look for them and help if you can.

**Nemo resiedo**

In light of all the goodwill from the wider community, it is sad to see that governments have been so slow to do their duty to stand by those who helped them.

Some have been brought to safety, but many more have been left to fend for themselves. While we have interpreter colleagues living in fear and in hiding, jobless and homeless, arbitrarily refused asylum, and even deported back to danger, we still have plenty to do.

*All photos courtesy of the author.*

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**Footnotes**

[1] Red T is a non-profit organization dedicated to the protection of translators and interpreters in conflict zones and other adversarial settings; FIT = Fédération Internationale de Traducteurs; IAPTI = International Association of Professional Translators and Interpreters; WASLI = World Association of Sign Language Interpreters; CLI = Critical Link International, promoting the field of community interpreting.

*Recommended citation format:*