AIIC forum on interpreters in conflict areas

A recent panel discussion in Rome drew attention to the plight of interpreters in conflict areas and called for fairer treatment by employers, often governments and their armed forces. Promotion of codes of practice and opportunities for training were cited as urgent needs, as was special status to safeguard physical integrity.

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Our first forum a year ago withstood the challenge of snow and ice. This year we faced sheets of depressing winter rains. I was to moderate and hoped that my flu-stricken voice would hold out and that people would brave the weather. And indeed they did; the room was full to overflowing.

Aspirin and throat tablets at the ready, I opened the session with a quick overview.

- **360 interpreters died** and more than 1200 were injured in Iraq whilst helping the US forces alone between 2003 and 2008.
- **Iraqi interpreters are targeted for attack** by opponents to foreign intervention who consider them to be traitors.
- **Many interpreters are treated unfairly** by the companies that recruit them, the insurance schemes that are supposed to protect them and the governments for whom they have worked often at the cost of life or limb.
- **Inadequate pay or compensation packages**, lack of post-conflict protection, denial of asylum or admission to the countries whose forces they have helped, and even absence of care for those who do finally reach those countries exacerbate their problems.

Iraq is of course only one centre of conflict and the US forces are not the only ones whose government often fails to care for the people providing language services. In conflict or post-conflict situations throughout the world, thousands of ‘linguists’ are recruited (usually through subcontractors) by armed forces, peacekeepers, NGOs, journalists, businessmen, etc. The global figures for dead and wounded interpreters must be very high. It should be our objective to obtain and make known the figures as part of an effort to protect the lives of these interpreters.

The participants

**Professor Bartolini**, a political scientist and research assistant in international law at the University of Siena, member of the International Institute of Humanitarian Law in Sanremo, gave us an erudite survey of references to interpreters in international law. He explained how the law can protect certain groups of people, and provided us with a glimpse of how, with the help of international organisations, we might be able to obtain an internationally-recognised status for interpreters in conflict areas, stressing their ‘non-party to conflict’ situation. He also raised a question which concerns interpreters everywhere and particularly in AIIC, which has a strict policy on confidentiality: what happens if interpreters are called as witnesses in courts of law? It was a
fascinating study: [read it here](#).

**General Blais**, former Major General of the Italian army, former Vice President of the International Institute of Humanitarian Law and Director of the CSCE Regional Centre Banja Luka, is an expert on Balkan history. He spoke of his own experiences with interpreters, stressing the differences between professionals and non-professionals in the areas of training, recruitment and tasks. His account, with a malicious twinkle in his eye, of relations with the non-professional local interpreters (sometimes young and pretty…) had us laughing, but he stressed how necessary these interpreters are in both combat and peacekeeping missions. Their linguistic skills may vary, but they can often provide important local and cultural information. He considered that they were a part of a team and should be treated as such.

He also discussed the advantages and risks to both parties when hiring local interpreters. Whilst the interpreters earn relatively good money by local standards, they face risks similar to those run by the troops or organisations they help, and may be at great risk when those troops leave. As for the users who depend on them, they have no control over the quality of the interpretation and also face the problem of trust: Will the interpreters give confidential information to their compatriots? Are they spies?

**Confidentiality is a key element of our AIIC code of ethics, the very basis of the trust that all parties should have in the interpreters they use.**

We are aware that interpreting is practiced in various ways. Different skills and training are needed to face different on-the-job requirements. We are trained for ‘teamwork’ within a team of interpreters, whereas in the field an interpreter will usually work alone. We tend to see ourselves and are generally perceived as impartial intermediaries between parties. In a conflict situation, being identified as part of the employers’ team, especially of a military employer’s team, makes the interpreter very vulnerable. It calls into question his/her impartiality and the credibility of the interpretation.

It is obvious that there must be a debate about the role of the interpreter and the perception of that role by others.

We would like to see all interpreters and their users respect a code of practice. We cannot guarantee that no interpreters are spies, nor can we guarantee that all users of interpreters respect the work they do: if they did, then the lot of locally-recruited interpreters would be better.

All employers have a duty to aid and protect the interpreters whose vital services they use.

**Valey Arya**, an Afghan born in Herat and now living in London, is a consultant to governmental and non-governmental organisations, a researcher and an interpreter. He shared his insight into the problems facing both interpreters and their users in Afghanistan. He stressed the difficulty of finding professionals in any field in present-day Afghanistan and spoke of the lack of respect shown towards non-professional interpreters. Lessons learned in ‘cultural awareness training’ for members of the armed forces may go by the board in situations of stress; soldiers are not always sensitive to the local people or to local interpreters. Interpreters may indeed be seen to be ‘helping the enemy’ by their own compatriots, who may also be jealous of them. How can any interpreter do a good job if not treated with respect? If referred to cursorily as ‘terp’ by one side and ‘son of Bush’ or worse by the others?

Given the risks they run, he didn’t consider that $650-900 USD per month earned by interpreters to be a lot of money. If anything happened to the interpreter, there were often difficulties and delays in obtaining medical care or compensation for themselves or the family. Ten thousand USD paid to the family in the case of the death of an interpreter is hardly compensation for the loss of a family
member and breadwinner. And he told us that interpreters involved in kidnappings are often killed to prevent them talking about any negotiations held to obtain the release of hostages.

Valey also pointed out the possible problem of recruiting interpreters from one ethnic/linguistic group to work in another part of the country: they may not like their own compatriots there and their interpretation may be biased or inaccurate because they do not understand the local language/dialect. Recruitment must take this kind of thing into account.

Whilst approving AIIC’s lobbying on behalf of local interpreters, Valey called for investment by Western universities in the training of qualified interpreters in Kabul.

AIIC might not be able to help directly with training, but we do support the effort of our colleague Barbara Moser at Geneva University who has developed an online training programme for interpreters in conflict areas. Any other universities interested out there?

Our final panellist was Marco Guidi, journalist with ‘Il Messaggero’ newspaper. A former war correspondent specialising in the Middle East and the Balkans, the rotund and energetic Marco took us on his rip-roaring travels with interpreters in conflict areas around the world. He confirmed the ‘symbiotic’ nature of the relationship between the journalist and the interpreter previously mentioned by General Blais. From the ‘illiterate in three languages’ driver who saved him from a number of scrapes, to the ‘rather pretty’ university lecturer whose interpretation was ‘perfect’, it’s obvious that this relationship between the journalist and the interpreter/‘fixer’ is a very close one.

The discussion

Various speakers in the ensuing discussion said that we should take advantage of this relationship between journalists and interpreters in order to help interpreters in conflict areas. We need journalists to help us obtain and publish statistics like the ones their organisations publish about their own profession (see Committee to Protect Journalists).

And we need them to join us in the call for the release of kidnapped interpreters.

Christine Weise, AIIC member and President of the Italian section of Amnesty International, quoted from AI’s report on some of the arraignment proceedings before military commissions at Guantanamo. As a defender of human rights, AI recognises the need for an accurate translation of proceedings for the accused in a criminal trial and stresses the need for government to provide two interpreters to ensure a proper service.

Andrea Angeli, who spent many years as a UN peacekeeper, and is spokesman and political adviser of EUROPOL in Afghanistan, has written a book about his experience: Professione Peacekeeper.

Paulo Cappelli, a captain in the Italian army, interpreter and candidate to join AIIC, spoke of the similarities between civilian and military interpreters.

Ms. Archini, former chief of linguistic services in the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs believed that AIIC could well advise international organisations (e.g. the UN) which hold training programmes for their staff before deployment abroad.

It may be difficult to convince the Taliban not to kill interpreters, but by furthering the adoption of sound professional practices and by seeking a protected status for interpreters in conflict areas, we believe AIIC has a role to play in changing the way that interpreters are seen and treated by all parties to conflict.

With these and other comments from members, the project group gained a wealth of ideas for future activities. As the meeting came to an end and everyone trooped off to the reception offered by our generous Italian colleagues, the rain stopped, the Chair sucked another throat tablet to preserve what
was left of her voice, and Rome had become a milestone on the way to contributing to a better fate for colleagues in areas of conflict.

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**Recommended citation format:**