Interpreters are being killed. Help save a life

Personal testimony by an interpreter who worked with ISAF forces in Afghanistan convinced me that more must be done to get governments to act responsibly and safeguard the lives of people who serve th

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Interpreters often go unnoticed, heard but not seen. But that depiction is turned on its head in conflict zones where interpreters are commonly members of the local community and their identities known no matter what precautions may be taken. Often seen as collaborators, they – and by extension their families - are vulnerable to retaliation both during and after their time of service.

I had read about this, but these simple truths acquired urgency for me when I recently heard direct testimony from people who have worked in war zones. I was in Nuremberg the first week in July representing Brazil at a meeting of the AIIC Council. It was an important meeting for the association as this is the year of our 60th anniversary. On the last day our colleagues of the German region very kindly organized a seminar on interpreters in conflict zones. The choice of venue was particularly fitting: the courthouse where the Nuremberg trials where held.

The Courtoom

When I walked into the courtroom I was surprised by how small it was. How did all the defendants, prosecutors, defense lawyers, judges, guards, journalists and, last but not least, interpreters fit in this minute room? This impression quickly vanished, however, in the exhibit room the moment our guide reminded us, once again, of the merciless atrocities that had been tried there.

After I had taken a seat in the middle of the courtroom, which the German judiciary today uses as a regular courtroom, and just before the meeting began, the panel moderator Rainer Huhle issued a fateful housekeeping rule that dropped a weight on my shoulders: "We kindly request everyone to please put away your cameras and recording devices as, for security reasons, this conference may not be recorded."

But … wait a minute! Wasn't this the very same room where the world was able to witness the trials? Where journalists had access to all the proceedings and where the Court kindly gave the defendants sun glasses to protect their eyes from the very bright lights in the room, set up especially for the press?

We were later told that the session could not be recorded because this would entail a death risk for our fellow interpreter K.R., who had worked for ISAF forces in Afghanistan. I had read various posts on Interpreting the World and Interpreters in Conflict Zones but I had not fully perceived the importance of initiatives to help remedy the situation. Reading numbers on something that is
happening in a remote place is quite different from hearing the same words coming out of the mouth of a person who fears for his/her life and those of their family and co-workers.

Right now, somewhere in the world an interpreter is being killed! Once again, just as so many years ago, the walls of the famous Nuremberg Courthouse have to endure the atrocities of war. However, instead of prosecuting the offenders this time, the "allies" are the ones who are neglecting to save the lives of thousands of people who worked for them. The ISAF forces are going back home, leaving behind the many interpreters (and other professionals for that matter) who made their work possible. They are leaving them there to face death.

Testimony

It seems that governments have not learned the lesson and are blatantly ignoring the consequences of war and the ensuing death toll. Bertham Hacker, a former member of the German Federal Army, told us that armies used interpreters but never gave a thought to what could happen to them once their mission was completed. He elaborated on the number of times interpreters actually saved the lives of military personnel. And he reminded us that the army has a rule: never leave a fellow soldier behind on the battlefield. This is certainly an honorable rule, but what about their interpreters?

Alain Boy, also a member of the Armed Forces, took the floor to emphasize the importance of interpreters and how very often they go above and beyond the call of duty to help the forces, thus saving the lives of many soldiers. He added that interpreters also teach them extremely important cultural aspects, and ended by stressing that something has to be done to ensure they will be well taken care of.

The fear I heard in the voice of the interpreter, however, made it clear to me that the two speakers with military backgrounds do not reflect the opinion of the institutions they were part of. His fear made me shiver. I thought to myself: It cannot be that, so many years later, we find ourselves once again in this historic building and will allow thousands of people to be murdered while doing nothing to prevent it.

AIIC President Linda Fitchett reminded us that attention was given to this matter only when journalists were kidnapped, and that an international outcry was heard only after Italian journalist Daniele Mastrogiacamo and Ajmal Naqshbandi were captured in Afghanistan in 2007. The life of the journalist was saved when he was exchanged for a Taliban prisoner. But Ajmal, his interpreter, did not merit the same fate and was later killed by his kidnappers.

Linda Fitchett also informed us of shocking figures and cases, although it need not be mentioned that there is no official registry on this, or if the governments and military do have one, they are not disclosing it. Nevertheless, the figures cited in the press based on information reported by the contracting agency, which only cover US troops, show that up until 2009, 360 translators had been killed and 1,200 injured.

Verdict

On my flight back home the day after the seminar, I knew something had to be done to put a stop to this. We have proof that governments and the armed forces have not done enough to ensure the safety of those they hire, thus we must find a way of making them do more, of accepting their responsibility.

I urge you to join in this endeavor. Please make sure you “like” the Interpreters in Conflict Zones Facebook page and recommend it to as many people as possible. Also consider contacting local associations, human rights organizations and your own government on this matter.
This is your chance to make a difference, a difference that may save a life!

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