Interpreters in conflict areas: a new AIIC project

Most members stayed until the last day of the AIIC Assembly, a Sunday morning at that, in order to participate in the panel discussion and open debate on interpreters in conflict areas. The response was enthusiastic and the ensuing exchange of views a harbinger of new directions.

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Sometimes the best-made plans go awry. We were very disappointed that Florence Aubenas was unable to make it to Nice due to a fall in the very wintry conditions. She had been 'on board' almost since the beginning, driven by the desire to do something for interpreters in the same situation as the one who had been with her during her terrible ordeal in Iraq. Then, after various other difficulties along the way, we heard the dreadful news about the murder of the friend of the Afghan interpreter who was coming to bear witness to the difficulties of interpreters in his home country. We began to wonder whether the forum would have to take place without any outside guests, but we held a trump card!

Tim Washington, former police officer and former member of the senior management team advising UN election observers, inspired us all with his observations from an experience of 7+ years in conflict environments, including Iraq (while based in Jordan) and Kosovo. He explained that most of the interpreters he worked with were bright, intelligent young people who had been through university but had found no other job in the situation in which their country found itself. He reminded us that we had an organised profession whereas they had no tools and no rules. Moreover, their employers neither knew what interpreters needed to perform well, nor what the limits and boundaries of their job should be. AIIC therefore has a role to play in providing the tools of the trade to interpreters and information to those who use them. Many of us thought that if Tim is ever without a job, he would make an excellent PR advisor to AIIC - although his ideas for creating AIIC offices 'on the ground' in areas of conflict might just exceed our budget and staffing capabilities.

Margot Horspool, Emeritus professor of European law and member of AIIC, stepped onto the panel at the last moment and spoke of the need to regulate the contractual situation between interpreters and their 'employers', the need to educate users and the need for AIIC to be proactive, perhaps in cooperation with other bodies such as the Association of Police and Court Interpreters in the UK. In seeking to provide information to both interpreters and users, she thought a simple, practical approach would be the most effective.

After evoking her childhood in Indonesia, Ellen Moerman, UK barrister and member of the bar human rights group (and an AIIC member) stressed the need to help with basic training, as well as the importance of debriefing of interpreters, providing psychological counselling to those who have been through traumatic experiences and refuge for those in peril at home. In a survey of 25
international bodies on the recruitment and protection of interpreters, only one admitted that they recruit locally because it is the cheapest solution!

During discussion colleagues posed many questions about:

- The way in which interpreters in conflict areas are used.
- What they are called (fixers, interpreters, translators, language assistants, etc.) and how that may affect the way they are perceived by users/employers.
- What kinds of problems have arisen.
- How AIIC can contact users and/or employers.
- Whether non-professionals tend to want to sound good, whether or not their version is accurate.
- What their language proficiency tends to be.

Others commented on:

- The use of local interpreters in the South African Truth and Reconciliation process and how theatre was helping some to overcome trauma.
- The difficulties of even professional interpreters when identified by the press and considered by some to be sympathisers of the parties for whom they have been interpreting.
- How in a multilingual country everyone considers themselves interpreters, making it very difficult to convince people that there are criteria for the job.

This lively discussion carried over into the Assembly debate, introduced by Eduardo Kahane. Simple and practical solutions were called for to help these "interprètes de fortune". Such an effort might also help us move towards that elusive recognition of the profession that we all crave.

At the end of the day, the resolution passed with a whopping 1349 votes behind it. We can safely say that many hopes and expectations have been placed on the working group, which must report back to the next Assembly in three years time.

We shall be relying on a network of colleagues to help; many have already come forward. We shall have to approach and work closely with associations in the human rights field, with journalists, trade unions, lawyers and international organisations, and especially with the users of interpretation services.

Roughly speaking, the action plan will be divided into three areas, closely following the text of the resolution: communications, a model contract and political resolutions. Communication is pretty obvious: telling each other what we're doing, informing interpreters in conflict areas of what we're doing, talking to the users of interpreter services and to the public at large. By providing interpreters with information about professional values and ethics and where they can find training modules, we can help make that service better. If interpreters know what they should look for in their relations with users and if we make sure that users are aware of the problem we're dealing with, we can help protect interpreters. We can help users by publishing a manual or checklist of the "do's and don'ts" of using interpreters, just one example of the "simple solutions" that were called for. Things would be so much better for everyone involved if we could all cooperate on this project, raising awareness of the plight of interpreters and of the nature of interpreting in general.

Work on a model contract will involve obtaining information about the users of interpretation services in various conflict situations and the present nature of relations between interpreters and users, particularly contractual relations and provision of on-site and post-conflict protection for them and their families. On the basis of that, we're hoping to convince users to enter into the negotiation of a framework contract for the future.

The political resolutions part will require research into the legal and historical background of
professions that have achieved a degree of protection and a certain status for persons working in the field (for example, journalists and medical personnel), and into international texts regulating conflict situations (e.g. the Geneva Conventions). From there, we're hoping to convince the UN and/or Council of Europe to adopt a resolution to help protect interpreters.

There's plenty to do. We've noted the names of those who have already contacted us, but we invite you to get in touch if you have useful skills - apart from enthusiasm, of course! We'll be needing:

- People who work or have contacts in the media.
- People with events organising experience.
- Keen surfers of the Internet to feed us info about the situation of interpreters in areas of conflict or inform us of blogs or a twitter on the subject.
- Anyone with good contacts in the UN or Council of Europe who might be able to help further a resolution, or in the ILO for the question of recognition of the profession.
- Individuals with legal skills. We already know at least a couple of legal eagles, but please contact us if you fall into this category.
- Colleagues who have worked or are working in conflict areas, or can put us in touch with local interpreters in such areas.
- Anyone who might have information about working conditions and contracting of interpreters, or relevant contacts in this area.
- Personnel of international, governmental and non-governmental organisations, or of any other body which employs local interpreters in areas of conflict.

By working together we can improve the lot of all interpreters working in areas of conflict - an achievement that would be of great benefit to all of us.

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