



Conflict zones: the first hurdle

Interpreters in conflict zones received the support of forty members of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly in a Declaration signed on 29 April 2010 in Strasbourg. The signatories are from all the political groups; the Declaration may be signed by other members between now and the next session in June.

Eduardo KAHANE.

Published: June 15, 2010 Last updated: December 2, 2015

This is the first international document that publicly recognises the difficult circumstances under which interpreters work – far from the gaze of the media or society – and signals a political will to take action. This is the first step on what remains a long road ahead. However the leap from zero to one is greater than the leap from one to infinity. It will now be necessary to convert the support of this group of members into a commitment from the Legal Affairs and Human Rights Committee to carry out a study and submit a resolution to the Plenary of the Parliamentary Assembly. This was the mandate entrusted to the Interpreters in Conflict Zones Group by the AIIC Assembly in 2009.

The task ahead is daunting, but this development augurs well for the future. The Declaration calls for the protection of interpreters' neutrality and impartiality akin to the safeguards in place for Red Cross workers and what makes it significant is not simply the number of supporters but who they are. Signatories include the chairman of the Assembly's leading committees such as Political Affairs (Björn von Sydow, Socialists, Sweden), Legal Affairs and Human Rights (Christos Pourgourides, EPP, Cyprus) and the Honouring of Obligations of Members (Dick Marty, ALDE, Switzerland). Members from more than twenty countries and all the political groups in the Chamber signed the Declaration, including the chairmen and deputy chairmen of the largest groups (ALDE [1](#), Socialists and EPP [2](#)).

It would be remiss of us not to emphasize the probity and political courage of the initiator of the Declaration, Dick Marty. He was the author of the 2007 report on the CIA's secret detention centres in Council of Europe member states. It remains one of the Council of Europe's most influential reports, and it was instrumental in convincing the US electorate to look afresh at the human rights aspect of the country's defence policy, a political taboo at the time.



There is an ethical and human rights dimension to how interpreters in conflict zones work, the recognition and respect they are given and the conditions of their employment. We are not there yet but one day we will be able to negotiate terms and conditions if we keep up the pressure. This is our avowed aim although we are clearly not attempting to change national defence policies. We can happily set our sights lower.

This Declaration is a major public endorsement for the recognition, not just of interpreters in conflict zones, but of the whole profession throughout the world. Opening up to our colleagues in the world's hot spots has brought general recognition of the wider profession. This is a valuable lesson and it should encourage us to pay closer attention to court, community and sign language interpreters.

If we achieve our aim at the Council of Europe the ultimate target beckons: the United Nations General Assembly. Such a proposal is no more improbable than the AIIC Resolution on Interpreters in Conflict Zones appeared back in January 2009. It is the very target our clear-sighted members set us in Nice.

You can read the full statement on the Council of Europe web site in [English](#) or [French](#).

Eduardo Kahane is member of the AIIC Interpreters in Conflict Zones Group.

English version by [Phil Smith](#)

- 1 Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe
- 2 Group of the European People's Party

Recommended citation format:
Eduardo KAHANE. "Conflict zones: the first hurdle". aiic.org.