
OPEN LETTER

PROTECTING TRANSLATORS
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May 2016

Sen. Mitch McConnell, Senate Majority Leader

Sen. Harry Reid, Senate Minority Leader

Sen. John McCain, Chairman, Senate Armed Services Committee

Rep. Paul Ryan, Speaker of the House

Rep. Mac Thornberry, Chairman, House Armed Services Committee

Rep. Bob Goodlatte, Chairman, House Judiciary Committee

Dear Senators and Representatives,

Translators and interpreters are critical to national security. They are the first line of defense against domestic dangers and foreign threats – whether translating terrorism chatter pulled from the airwaves or interpreting for troops in conflict zones. The work of these linguists, however, often comes at great personal cost. In the case of host nation linguists, they are hunted down, abducted, tortured and assassinated by insurgent groups who consider them traitors for collaborating with foreign militaries.

That is why the undersigned, representing the world's major translator and interpreter associations and advocacy organizations, read with alarm the current mark-up of the 2017 defense spending bill (H.R.4909: National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2017). Specifically, we are referring to the evisceration of the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program for Afghan translators and interpreters.

The SIV program, which has moved along in fits and starts over the years, is again at a critical juncture. H.R.4909 does not provide for additional visas for Afghan allies, despite the fact that there is a backlog of more than 10,000 applications, which the current allotment of 4,000 visas cannot accommodate. To clear pending cases, we ask that Congress authorize a sufficient number of additional visas. A corollary to this issue is the length of time it takes to grant visas. Although the NDAA for Fiscal Year 2014 mandated that the process not exceed nine months, applicants with whom we have been in contact often are forced to wait, in hiding, for years. It is vital that the Departments of State and Homeland Security be held to this time limit, since linguists remain under constant threat.

Another concern pertains to the narrowing of eligibility criteria that would go into effect at the end of this month. To make visa decisions based on workplace distinctions – for instance, interpreters working at a military base would be deemed ineligible whereas those accompanying soldiers on missions would qualify – may make sense to some in the U.S.; however, the Taliban do not parse job descriptions but target linguists indiscriminately when they return to their communities. It is important that the program apply to all translators and interpreters regardless of their work context. Furthermore, the prospect of the program ending this year will leave current hires with no option for escaping their high-risk environment. We prevail upon you to not let the program expire, as the danger to linguists has no expiration date.

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The visa process is further exacerbated for translators and interpreters – whether from Afghanistan or Iraq – by the difficulty in obtaining employment verification from defense contractors, a prerequisite to completing the SIV paperwork. In fact, contractors frequently ignore these requests, and measures should be taken to compel them to issue such verifications. We are also aware of one contractor who supplied interpreters to U.S. troops in Afghanistan and subsequently placed many of them on watch- and blacklists for what often amounted to cultural misunderstandings, resulting in their applications being rejected. Thus, we believe that Congress must demand that fair and transparent procedures be applied at all stages of the process, particularly for red-flagged applicants.

Acting with honor toward linguist allies is crucial not only to future recruiting efforts but to America's standing in the world. And while we understand the need to thoroughly vet anyone seeking asylum in the United States, translators and interpreters who served alongside U.S. troops in Afghanistan already underwent security checks and have a proven track record; many even saved soldiers' lives. We consider it a moral imperative to prioritize their safety and grant them visas without delay.

We urge members of Congress to amend the bill to reflect our concerns.

Sincerely,

Maya Hess, President, Red T

Linda Fitchett, Chair, Conflict Zone Group, International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC)

Henry Liu, President, International Federation of Translators and Interpreters (FIT)

Aurora Humarán, President, International Association of Professional Translators and Interpreters (IAPTI)

Angela Sasso, President, Critical Link International (CLI)

Debra Russell, President, World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI)

David Rumsey, President, American Translators Association (ATA)

Aitor Arauz Chapman, Region Chair, AIIC USA

Esther M. Navarro-Hall, Chair, National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators (NAJIT)

Diana Rhudick, President, New England Translators Association (NETA)

Katharine Allen & Barry Olsen, Co-Presidents, InterpretAmerica

William P. Rivers, Executive Director, Joint National Committee for Languages –

National Council for Language and International Studies (JNCL-NCLIS)

Lori Thicke, Founder, Translators without Borders (TwB)