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Interpreters are caught in the crossfire in Afghanistan

8/7/2014

The Bundeswehr couldn't work without them in Afghanistan. But local translators and interpreters often in danger because of their close relationship with foreign troops. Many even receive threats.



"I wasn't aware of the risk at the time," said Ahmed (not his real name). Between 2010 and 2013, the young Afghan served as an interpreter for the German army, the Bundeswehr, and other ISAF troops from different countries under NATO command. The insurgents in his own country branded him a traitor for helping foreign armies. Three times, Ahmed received direct threats from the Taliban. On one occasion, they even planted explosive devices outside his house. Fearing for their lives, Ahmed and his wife left their home last year.

The risky life of interpreters and translators

Many assistants of international troops in Afghanistan have gone through the same ordeal as Ahmed. At peak times, the Bundeswehr alone employed some 1,500 local staff: as drivers, mechanics, guards or translators. 700 are still in the Bundeswehr's service today. Interpreters and language assistants play a particularly important role. Those civilians work together closely with the foreign soldiers on a daily basis. By hiring local staff the troops hope to win the trust and support of the local population and to avoid cultural misunderstandings. For the German soldiers, their work often proves essential for survival. "Afghan local staff are extremely important for the success of the mission in Afghanistan," said a spokesman of the Bundeswehr Operations Command. Speaking from his own experience, he said they're "often the key to success."

But it's this visible collaboration with international troops that turns translators and interpreters into targets, said Linda Fitchett. She is the President of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC), representing more than 80,000 translators and interpreters worldwide - together with its partner organizations FIT, IAPTI, and Red T. AIIC and its partners inform about the rights and obligations of interpreters, translators and their clients and employers. The organizations campaign for better protection and more support for their members during and after conflicts.



A Bundeswehr soldier and an interpreter at work in Afghanistan

Dangerously close to the army?

One of AIIC's and its partner organizations' biggest goal is a UN resolution which would recognize the right to physical integrity for interpreters and translators and recognize their impartial status – much like with journalists or Red Cross staff. That would help avoid a situation where interpreters are seen as spies by the local population.

The translators are not just at risk while at work by the side of soldiers. Many Afghan interpreters are afraid of potential acts of revenge by the Taliban or local insurgents. Ahmed is by far not the only one to have received threats. “Some translators try to keep their identity secret,” said Linda Fitchett, “but their enemies know who they are, where they are and how they can hurt them.”

In November 2013, a Bundeswehr interpreter was murdered just before his departure to Germany – probably by the Taliban. His body was discovered in a car, about one month after the Bundeswehr withdrew from the northern Afghan provincial capital Kunduz. Fitchett and the AIIC estimate that several hundred translators and interpreters have been killed since the beginning of the war in Afghanistan, and several thousand have been wounded. Fitchett warned that their number is likely to rise after the international troops withdraw from the country at the end of 2014.



These interpreters are working to raise awareness of their precarious situation

German support for local staff

Currently, some 9,800 Afghan local staff are employed by German entities, such as the ministries of defense and foreign affairs. The German government has agreed to take them to Germany if they're directly threatened. But the local staff have to prove that they're under threat. The case is then assessed by a commission consisting of representatives of the interior, foreign and defense ministries, who will then give a recommendation. The German interior ministry has the last say about whether or not somebody is then flown to Germany.

Germany has been criticized for this procedure of sometimes drawn-out assessments of individual cases. In June, German interior minister Thomas de Maiziere called the admission procedure "responsible and sensible".

By the end of July 2014, German authorities had registered 1,084 such notifications of threats. In more than one out of three cases, individual endangerment was confirmed. As a result, 222 Afghan assistants applied for a visa. So far, 174 former local staff have arrived in Germany – with 391 family members.

Ahmed is one of them. It took two months before his visa was granted, after he was threatened again. The 28-year-old had changed his place of residence in Afghanistan several times by then. He now lives in northern Germany with his wife; he receives financial assistance from the German state and he is learning German in a language school. He is happy in Germany, he said, but he misses his family. He is afraid that his relatives might receive threats. He doesn't know whether he can ever return to Afghanistan. "I would go back when it is safe there again," said Ahmed. "It's my home country, after all." But at the moment, Afghanistan is not a safe place – not for him, nor for many others.