

Red T Translator/Interpreter Incident Database

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Abstract

Translators and interpreters (T/Is) in conflict zones and other high-risk settings are targeted by state and non-state actors alike. To mitigate this critical state of affairs, relevant policies must be implemented or improved. However, to drive meaningful policy change for the more vulnerable members of this largely invisible profession, accurate figures are needed. That is why Red T, a nonprofit organization advocating for the protection of T/Is at risk, is calling on governmental, intergovernmental and academic bodies to contribute data to the first database cataloguing incidents of T/I persecution, prosecution, imprisonment, abduction, torture and assassination.

Keywords: Translator, Interpreter, Database, Conflict Zone, Terrorism

Résumé

Les traducteurs et interprètes se trouvant dans des zones de conflit et autres environnements à hauts risques deviennent des cibles pour les acteurs étatiques et non étatiques. Pour atténuer cet état des choses critique, des politiques pertinentes doivent être mises en œuvre ou améliorées. Cependant, pour appuyer des changements constructifs en matière de politiques pour les membres plus vulnérables de ces professions largement invisibles, des chiffres précis sont nécessaires. C'est pour cette raison que Red T, une organisation à but non lucratif défendant la protection des traducteurs et interprètes à risque, invite les organes gouvernementaux, intergouvernementaux et académiques à contribuer leurs données à la première base de données cataloguant les incidents de persécution, poursuites judiciaires, emprisonnement, enlèvement, torture et assassinat à l'encontre de traducteurs et interprètes.

Mots-clés : traducteur, interprète, zone de conflit, terrorisme

1. Introduction

At a time when turmoil, warfare and mass migration afflict many parts of the world, a growing body of academic literature has established both the importance and the vulnerability of translators and interpreters (T/Is) in conflict and post-conflict situations. In a humanitarian response to the plight of these linguists, the nonprofit Red T was founded in 2010 with the mission of protecting T/Is in high-risk settings. These settings include war zones, detention centers, sites of political unrest, and terrorism-related venues, as well as countries in which translators of books, news items and other textual material deemed controversial are persecuted. Red T's stated vision is a world in which T/Is can work free from fear of persecution, prosecution, imprisonment, abduction, torture and assassination. To accomplish this, the nonprofit engages in a variety of policy-focused and educational initiatives designed to raise awareness across the world among governments, intergovernmental organizations and the public at large.¹ While many of the advocacy efforts have borne fruit, they were at times hampered by a lack of data. Seeking to address this dearth of facts and figures, Red T started gathering information on T/I incidents for the first database on this topic.

2. Challenges in Data Gathering

The challenges in gathering open-source data on a subgroup of a profession that, by default, is largely invisible are manifold. Prime among them is the nature of the settings and incidents, which for obvious reasons are not conducive to transparency. These include war zones in which civilian T/Is are targeted by insurgents due to their collaboration with foreign militaries, foreign correspondents and other foreign entities; the terrorism arena; nation states with restricted freedom of expression that unjustly arrest and prosecute T/Is; and instances where literary translators are the victims of aggravated assault or homicide. Another difficulty arises from casualty statistics released by governments that subsume the T/I category under the catch-all heading of locally employed civilians, as well as governments and private defense contractors that are tightlipped when approached for T/I figures. Additionally, names often pose a problem, whether because of misspellings, inconsistencies in transliteration, naming conventions, name variants, or the popularity of certain names—all of which create the likelihood of confusion—not to mention the failure to name T/Is at all.²

¹ Please see <https://www.red-t.org>

² Frequently, T/Is are not considered sufficiently important to warrant mention; in other instances, their anonymity is preserved to protect their identity.

3. Red T Pedagogical Module

3.1 Collaboration With Columbia University

The Institute for Comparative Literature and Society at Columbia University in New York City conducts the Global Language Justice Initiative (GLJ),³ a seminar sponsored by the Andrew T. Mellon Foundation. As its name implies, the GLJ explores issues arising from the interrelationship of language and justice. Within the framework of this initiative, GLJ launched a strategic partnership with Red T. One of the results was a week-long pedagogical module to be incorporated into the syllabus of a related graduate-level course. The module was drafted by Alexandra Méndez, a GLJ Fellow, with the assistance of Red T. It introduces students to the Red T cause and different types of T/I rights violations. The students' assignment is to contribute to the Red T database by: digitally scouring multiple media outlets of a selected country, region or conflict zone; tracking one or two incidents of T/I persecution, prosecution, imprisonment, abduction, torture or assassination; and providing a visual or narrative analysis of the identified content. As stated in the syllabus, the module's purpose is "for students to learn about linguists' rights, data gathering and analysis in the digital sphere, as well as contribute actively to a project of advocacy for the protection of translators and interpreters in crisis settings" (Méndez, 2019). While the specific learning objectives vary with a given course's academic focus, students uniformly gain valuable insights into the humanitarian arena.

The pilot run of the module took place during the 2019 spring semester in the context of a graduate course entitled "Global Language Justice in the Digital Sphere." Professor Isabelle Zaugg supervised the module, assigned various relevant readings and hosted Red T CEO Maya Hess, who gave a presentation on the topic that was followed by a Q&A session. Several weeks later, students handed in their contributions to the database.

This preliminary run yielded valuable data but also revealed that more structure was needed to guide students' research in an unfamiliar field. In response, Red T drafted a detailed template that will be deployed as an integral part of the module in a second run. With those results in hand and any necessary adjustments made, the module will be made available to universities worldwide, with an initial targeting of institutions with translation and interpretation programs.⁴

The above methodology is beneficial for several reasons: For one, it permits the capture of T/I incidents reported in non-English languages for a more globally inclusive database. Having such comprehensive data will allow for a deeper perspective on the issue, which, in turn, will inform Red T's policy efforts and media outreach. Second, T/I students will become sensitized to the fate of their colleagues at risk, while students from other fields of study will not only learn about an area of rising humanitarian concern but acquire an understanding of the critical importance of the T/I role in high-risk settings.

4. Conclusion

Red T believes that effective linguist-friendly policies and enhanced legal mechanisms must be undergirded by robust data. Thus, to supplement contributions from academia, Red T is urging governments to respond to our requests for casualty figures to the greatest extent possible.⁵

In the spirit of "Protect Translators | Protect Interpreters | Protect the World," we hope that our call for data will be answered by governments across the globe and facilitated by intergovernmental bodies such as UNESCO.

5. Bibliographical References

Méndez, A. (2019). *Pedagogical module: Database for the protection of translators and interpreters worldwide*. Unpublished.

³ See <https://languagejustice.wordpress.com>

⁴ Universities and other parties interested in participating in the Red T T/I Incident Database project should contact mhess@red-t.org

⁵ In the case of combat linguists, this request also extends to defense contractors and insurers.