



IS THE ACT OF TRANSLATING A CRIMINAL ACT?

*"We should vow that no professional translator will allow himself or herself to be deterred from conveying a message, however unwelcome, from one language to another, by threats of violence." Geoffrey Kingscott, *Language International* 3/6 (1991, p. 48)*

The 1976 Nairobi Recommendations of Unesco state that "translation promotes understanding between peoples and cooperation among nations by facilitating the dissemination of literary and scientific works, including technical works, across linguistic frontiers and the interchange of ideas". It also notes "the extremely important role played by translators and translations in international exchanges in culture, art and science, particularly in the case of works written or translated in less widely spoken languages" and recognises that "the protection of translators is indispensable in order to ensure translations of the quality needed for them to fulfil effectively their role in the service of culture and development".

The governments of certain countries are wary of such an interchange of ideas, ideas which could be risky for them. In those countries, the repression of translators and interpreters is twofold. On the one hand, they may fall prey to unjustified political terror, imprisonment, exile, torture or even death at the hands of their government, of an organised political group or of an opposition force. On the other hand, their civil liberties to take part in free and independent media, literature and other cultural expressions are violated since their work is censored through various means.

Those practitioners of language professions who are the subject of repression often remain nameless. If we name them and bring them out into the world, some of that

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repression will cease.

In Turkey, AHMET CEVDET ASKIN wrote to a member of the Amnesty International (AI) staff saying that he had translated into Turkish two books about Latin America, and was about to translate a third. He is considered a political prisoner, having been detained in Çanakkale prison for more than eight years. He apparently protested against wearing a prison uniform at his court hearing, and was not allowed to receive mail for one month in 1988.

AZIZ NESIN, a 78-year-old Turkish author who announced in January 1993 plans to publish a translation of *The Satanic Verses* in Turkey either on his own or with help from associates and friends, despite a 1989 ban on the import and distribution of the book in Turkey. The Writers' association in Turkey voted to publish the book four years earlier, but did not go ahead with the plans. Nesin is a former president of the Association. He has been receiving death threats since his announcements. The Iranian newspaper *Cumhuri Islami* is reported to have called for the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie to be extended to Nesin, and the Khordad Foundation has said the *fatwa* will include Nesin if he publishes the book. Nesin lives in Catalca. He has refused the Government's offer to provide security guards, saying he has no confidence in their ability to protect him.

On July 2, 1993, after Mr Nesin did publish excerpts from his translation into Turkish of *The Satanic Verses*, between 35 and 40 persons were killed and between 20 and 60 injured in the burning of a hotel where he was staying in Sivas, 370 kilometres east of Ankara.

In Indonesia, FILOMENO DA SILVA FERRIERA was reported in December 1992 to have been sentenced to 68 months in prison for translating Portuguese newspaper articles about East Timor.

In Kuwait, BELQUISS HAFEZ FADHEL was reportedly asked to translate for the Iraqis. An Iraqi student, she had just started working at the Ministry of Information at the time of the invasion. On June 15, 1991, she was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment for "collaborating with the Iraqis" in the *Al-Nida* case. *Al-Nida* (The Call) was an Iraqi occupation newspaper, and approximately ten of its Kuwaiti employees have been sentenced in grossly unfair trials. Some have even been sentenced to death.

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It is already too late to do anything for VASYL STUS, one of the leading poets of his generation. He died in a Soviet prison camp in September 1985. Stus was a leading representative of the "sixties", a group of literary intellectuals who spearheaded a revival of Ukrainian cultural and civic life during the 1960s.

Vasyl Stus was arrested on January 12, 1982 during the KGB crackdown against Ukrainian human rights activists. He was imprisoned for "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda", and for allowing his poetry to be published in the West. Despite intolerable conditions, he continued to write poems and translate prolifically from German (Goethe, Rilke and Brecht). These works were confiscated.

In the fall of 1975, Stus sent a statement from the Mordovian labour camp, accusing the KGB of making his people "tongueless and voiceless". He declared that the judicial trials of 1972 and 1973 were "trials against human thought, against the process of thinking itself, against humanism and against manifestations of filial love for one's nation". He renounced his Soviet citizenship at the end of 1978. "To be a Soviet citizen means to be a slave."

When exiled in 1979, Stus joined the Ukrainian Helsinki monitoring group, and was re-arrested on May 9, 1980. In camp he had surgery to remove over half his stomach, but was forced to fulfil his work quota in the mines.

Stus's second term of imprisonment involved ten years in a special regime camp and five years of internal exile. During the trial it was revealed that Stus had been tortured during the investigation. In addition to his earlier illnesses (stomach, heart, injured legs) he began to exhibit dangerous symptoms of a serious kidney malfunction. In a rare document called *Camp Notes* he wrote: "We have lost all rights to belong to ourselves. I feel like a walking corpse. They say that when God wants to punish someone he takes away his mind."

ALAIDE FOPPA, university lecturer, art critic, translator, poet, feminist and broadcaster, disappeared in Guatemala City on December 19, 1980. Although the Guatemalan government claimed it was guerillas who had captured her for ransom money, eyewitnesses state that it was an army commando unit which forced her from her mother's car. Her husband almost fell victim to a similar abduction attempt in 1978, and her journalist son was forced to leave Guatemala in 1980 after his name figured on rightwing death squad

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lists.

Alaide Foppa was a humanist voice in a region of violence. Aged 64 at the time of her abduction, she had been living in exile in Mexico City since the overthrow of President Arbenz's reformist government in 1954. Until her disappearance, she lectured in literature at the University of Mexico and wrote art criticism for the newspapers. She was also a distinguished translator of Italian, French and English literature. A leading member of AI, she worked to support women's rights, helping to found *FEM*, Mexico's first feminist magazine. She was also an active supporter of the indigenous women of Guatemala in their struggle against the ethnocidal policies of successive governments.

Las Palabras Y El Tiempo (Words and Time) is the collection of her poems published shortly before her disappearance.

In Iran, MEHDI DIBAJ, Bible teacher and translator, was arrested at some time in 1983-84, but was never given a reason for his arrest, nor was there any one incident that prompted it. He has never been formally charged nor given an official reason for his continued detention. During his detention, he has reportedly been brought to court on trumped up charges and to psychiatrists who have attempted to prove him mentally insane. He has spent two of his nine years of imprisonment in solitary confinement. He is reportedly being held in Sari, the provincial capital of Mazandaran. Before his arrest, he had been an evangelist and missionary to Afghanistan. He converted to Christianity 43 years ago and was thought to be imprisoned because of his religious beliefs. He was temporarily released after his Church paid a \$20,000 bail, but was reportedly rearrested shortly afterwards and tortured to make him renounce Christianity. He is said to have moved constantly from prison to prison. In December 1991, his children had not seen him for months. AI has adopted Mehdi Dibaj as a prisoner of conscience and believes that he has merely exercised his right to freedom of religion and speech, without using or advocating violence. These rights are guaranteed under the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, to which Iran is a State party.

In Iran also, MARIAM FIROUZ has been imprisoned since April 6, 1983. A writer and translator born in 1915, she has held high office (as a secretary or president) in the

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Democratic Organisation of Iranian Women. She is also the wife of the Secretary General of the Tudeh Party (the Iranian Communist party, which was legal at the time of her arrest). She has written her memoirs, *Familiar Faces*, and has translated French texts about the Vietnam war, and short stories. She was also the editor of Iran's only women's magazine, called *Jahan-e-Zanan* (Woman's World).

She was tried in 1986 before the Islamic revolutionary Court, who sentenced her to death, but this sentence was later commuted. She was apparently threatened with execution in early 1989. Held in Tehran's Evin prison, she often finds herself in solitary confinement. Under the Shah, she lived in exile after being sentenced to five years' imprisonment, but she returned to Iran after the 1979 revolution.

She reportedly suffers from heart disease and rheumatism. She has been denied surgery, but is reportedly under special supervision by doctors. She has lost hearing in one ear because of torture just after her arrest. She also has trouble swallowing food and finds it painful to sit due to beatings. Apparently, authorities have agreed to let her and her husband live together in a "separate place from the public prison" (i.e guarded detention centre outside the prison compound). However, there are bars on the windows and the doors are locked at night.

In Libya, ABDELRAHMAN ALI GAILY, a 43-year-old Sudanese national has been reportedly detained since March or April 1983. A former translator for the Libyan government at the International Centre of Research of the Green Book in Tripoli, he is married with two children, but his family (who lives abroad) has had no contact with him since his arrest.

There is, however, good news to report. MA THEINGEE was released at the end of 1992. A painter and art teacher in her early 40s, she had served as the personal secretary to Aung San Sun Kyi, leader of the Burmese National League for Democracy (NLD). Both women were arrested on July 20, 1989, during a mass crackdown on the opposition in Myanmar.

Before her arrest, Ma Theingee taught art at Yangon's (Rangoon) International School. She has also written a book on the tradition of Burmese puppet theatre, and has worked as

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a translator. The NLD party won over 80 per cent of the seats in the May 1990 national parliamentary elections. However, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), Myanmar's ruling military authority, has not yet convened the National Assembly or said when it will do so. Hundreds of political activists remain in prison, help for their opposition to military rule.

Ma Theingee had reportedly been sentenced for "breach of existing laws", but no information has been received about the date of her sentencing or the exact nature of the charges against her. It is probable she was tried by one of the military tribunals established by the SLORC, whose procedures fall far short of international fair trial standards.

In Vietnam, DINH THAN TIEN (alias TO THUY YEN), a poet, novelist, translator and publisher born on October 20, 1938, was arrested by the secret police at his house on November 13, 1990 during a crackdown and is now held at Phan Dang Luu camp in Ho-Chi-Minh-Ville. The police confiscated Mr To's poems and writing, letters critical of his government, documents showing that he had had contact with foreign organisations hostile to the government and received money from them, videos and records of songs based on his poems criticising human rights violations in Vietnam.

In poor health and incommunicado, he was previously arrested in Saigon in May 1975 and held in re-education camps. Sentenced in 1980 to eleven years of hard labour in an internment camp, he was reportedly tortured and suffered various illnesses. Released in 1985 after attempting suicide, he returned to Ho-Chi-Minh-Ville. He is one of seven writers reportedly accused of publishing an unlicensed newspaper, *Dien Dan Tu Do* (Free Forum) and sending abroad articles critical of the government. Ten issues of the newspaper are said to have been published between November and December 1990. According to AI, To was held without trial. He was released from camp around August or September 1992, but is reported to have been placed under house arrest while investigations continue.

In Israel and the Occupied Territories, SAMI ATAYA ABU SAMHADANAH, a freelance journalist and translator may have been released on February 24, 1993, at the expiry of an administrative detention order.

Lastly, in Afghanistan, ABDUL SAMAD, an interpreter, and MOHAMMAD

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NAZAR, a media worker, were arrested with French photojournalist ALAIN GUILLO in September 1987 on charges of "espionage" and "illegal entry into Afghanistan". In January 1988, they were sentenced by the Special Revolutionary Court to 16 years in prison. Their trial was believed to have fallen short of international standards for a fair trial. They were reportedly denied a defence lawyer of their choice and are unlikely to have been given the right to appeal to a higher tribunal. To Al's knowledge, no judicial review of their case took place. The Office of the Prime Minister had stated that the two men had been sentenced for "the crime of participating and cooperating in espionage activities of Alain Guillo and evasion of military service".

Since then, both prisoners have been released: Samad was released in late 1991/early 1992, before the change of government in Afghanistan, apparently through a payment of money. In early or mid-1992, he was in Pakistan. Nazar was released during an interim period between the fall of the former President Najib and the formation of the Islamist government in April 1992. Their current situation is unknown.

In a 1991 issue of *Language International*, Geoffrey Kingscott wrote in an endpiece on tolerance and diversity: "We should vow that no professional translator will allow himself or herself to be deterred from conveying a message, however unwelcome, from one language to another, by threats of violence." HITOSHI IGARASHI, translator into Japanese of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, has died as a result of that violence. The first step towards securing the respect for the fundamental fights of translators and interpreters is to name the nameless, whose crime is having conveyed a message, on their behalf or that of others, in print or in person, to their governments and compatriots. Then we can join forces and fight for their human rights, either by joining existing organisations such as Amnesty International and PEN International, or we can create a whole new one. Let's discuss the options for helping our colleagues.

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