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Robert M. Gates
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

November 20, 2008

Dear Mr. Secretary,

I am writing on behalf of the more than 10,000 members of the American Translators Association – the largest and oldest organization for translators and interpreters in the United States – to express our dismay at recent reports that the US Army is prohibiting Iraqi interpreters from wearing ski masks to protect their identities while working with our troops. While the costs of this policy are clear, the Army seems unable to articulate any benefit from it.

Lieutenant Colonel Steve Stover's statement that "professional units don't conceal their identity by wearing masks" is simply not supported by the facts. Elite forces in France and the United Kingdom routinely wear ski masks to protect their identities, and the faces of our own troops in Iraq are often obscured by sunglasses and bandannas used to keep out dust.

Interpreters are among the US government's most valuable employees in Iraq. Their language skills and cultural knowledge have enabled American forces to work with local populations, making Iraq safer for both US personnel and innocent civilians. The counterinsurgency effort now underway in Iraq is a battle for hearts and minds: it cannot be won without effective communication, and effective communication is impossible without interpreters. Their critical role in Iraq's recovery is precisely why more than 300 of them have been killed since 2003. Putting Iraqi interpreters at greater risk will surely lead to more deaths and more resignations, reducing the number of available interpreters and increasing the dangers faced by US troops.

Even if it is true, as Lieutenant Colonel Stover says, that the US is not suffering any shortage of interpreters, it is callous and ultimately self-defeating to ignore the real threat to these vital employees. They have saved innumerable American and Iraqi lives: why can't they be allowed to save their own lives – and the lives of their families – by protecting their identities?

If there is any benefit from this policy, we urge you to articulate it clearly so that all sides can work together to find a compromise that meets the Army's operational objectives without endangering its Iraqi partners. If not, we urge you to recognize the indispensable role played by interpreters in the Iraq recovery effort and reverse this policy as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jiri Stejskal".

Jiri Stejskal
President, American Translators Association