

REFUGEE VOICES



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Found in Translation

A conversation with
refugee community interpreters

The fate of refugees seeking international protection outside their home countries often depends on how well they can tell their own stories. What happens when an Iraqi woman who only speaks Arabic or an Afghan boy who only speaks Dari arrives in a country like Turkey? Without interpreters, refugee agencies would not be able to understand their stories, and could only assist a fraction of their clients. Many interpreters in Turkey are refugees themselves, and strongly identify with the experiences of the refugees they interpret for. They face the challenge of reliving the more traumatic aspects of refugees' lives during interviews, which can be both stressful and deeply upsetting. We asked a group of refugee interpreters to discuss their jobs, share their wisdom and give us some advice. We salute their hard work, patience and devotion to refugee communities.

My Perfect Life
How an Afghan artist for President Karzai ended up in Van

Darfur Days
Sudanese minors talk about their country and their dreams

Across the Border
Iranian refugees describe their experiences in eastern Turkey's Van.

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How did you decide to work as an interpreter with refugees?

HAMID, IRAN (H): By accident - I met the coordinator of an agency helping refugees and started working as an interpreter with her. My own refugee case was open at that time.

DANIEL, ERITREA (D): I have been doing this for five years. I came to the office of RLAP with the help of a friend from Eritrea. When I talked to Pilar, one of the legal advisors, she said that I could attend the interpreters' training. I attended the interpreters' class for eight or nine months and then after we finished that course, I was interested in working as an interpreter.

MAJID, SUDAN (M): There is a long story here. My father was working in Barclay's Bank in Sudan as a translator. And my uncle did the same work in London. Also, a relative of my mother's, who I am very close to, is an English teacher. So that's why I decided to work in this field. So when I found this job, I grabbed it. I love it.

How do you think being a refugee contributes to your work as an interpreter for other refugees?

H: It gives me motivation. I experienced what they are experiencing - especially knowing what it is like for a refugee living in Turkey. It motivates me to help them and helps me forget my own problems. It makes me a better interpreter. It's a positive thing.

D: An interpreter who is a refugee knows the feeling of the refugee and the language of the refugee and the reality of the refugee, especially if he is from the same country. If he works faithfully, he will help interpret better. He understands the feelings of the refugee:

if he had a problem in his country—say, he was politically tortured—he can express it accurately. If the interpreter knows what the refugee is feeling, he can help him tell his story.

M: If there is a refugee from Sudan, I have to help him. I am from the same tradition, so I can understand him better because of that. I can pass along information about him better, because I have been through similar experiences. We drink from same lake of torture; I can understand him.

What is the hardest thing for you when you interpret for refugees?

H: The hardest thing for me is when I hear about their situation and I can't do more to help them get them out of it. I know the guy is sick, or has financial problems, or has problems with an ignorant system, and there's nothing I can do to help him. You see your limitations.

D: If I have information about the events that the refugee has experienced, then I can understand it and explain the exact situation to the legal advisor. For example, I don't have problems interpreting for people from Eritrea and Ethiopia because I know the situations there, but when I interpret in Arabic, I may not know the situation in the country where the refugee is from. That makes it harder for me to always understand what he or she is talking about. The thing that makes me upset is when I interpret for someone who has had real problems, and then the UNHCR rejects him. That makes me very sad. I say "How? How?"

M: The hardest is when I interpret in psychiatric sessions. Some refugees feel pressure and are psychologically unwell. I feel their problems. Most of

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them are my friends, too. They have faced many of the same problems that I faced, but I have passed through them. There is a common experience. But still, I can do my job, through the pain of others.

What is the most satisfying aspect of your work?

H: The most satisfying part of my work is when I see someone who gets recognized or someone who has sent their children to school, or when I see people receiving at least a little help from NGOs and charities.

D: When I am sure that I am interpreting the refugee's words correctly, I am satisfied. If the client doesn't jump from one idea to another, that also is good, as well as if he delivers his case clearly, not in a confusing way.

M: When I see the happy faces of clients, and see they are satisfied with my work, then I feel good. When I have done well for the community I feel good. Then I feel inside that I am doing positive things.

Is there something about this work that makes you keep doing it?

H: Yes. Helping people is a good thing. It gives you patience, endurance, and sympathy. You feel that you are doing something positive – not all the time, but most of the time. And I can do this job wherever I go, no matter where I am.

D: I see it is good to keep working as an interpreter, and I want to improve my knowledge of interpreting. We don't have a lot of interpreters in Eritrea and Ethiopia, so it's good to fill the gap and help our community, and our refugees. So I'm encouraged to continue and to do it more effectively and to improve my work.

M: In the future, I want to study refugee issues. That's why I continue in this work. I want to learn more about refugees.

If you could give some advice to a new interpreter working with refugees, what would it be?

H: They should receive proper training, exercise their knowledge and practice. They should be honest to themselves about what they are doing – meaning, not to take sides but to remain objective. They should not think about the benefits of the job, but the consequences of the work that they do.

When I have done well for the community I feel that I am doing positive things.

D: I would tell him to explain as much about his role as possible to the refugee. The reason I say this is that refugees often think

that the interpreter is a legal advisor so they think that we have contacts and can decide their case. Sometimes, I see clients whose cases are rejected by UNHCR or are waiting a long time for an answer, and the refugee thinks that I am not helping him, not willing to support him. They say, why is your office not helping me? I say, everything is in the hands of God. You did all that you could. I try to show that I am also unhappy that his case is taking so long. I say, the same thing happened to me. And I explain that I am not a legal advisor. The interpreter should make it clear that he is only there to interpret and that he cannot receive complaints from a refugee but that they should give the complaints to their legal advisor or the UNHCR.

M: First, they must deeply know the English language. I would also tell them not to mix up their feelings with the feelings of refugees. They should not get too emotionally connected to refugees. This can corrupt the interpretation or corrupt the refugee's case. Also, be on time and respect the staff you are working with.

If you could give some advice to refugee NGO workers, what would it be?

H: They should be in closer contact with refugees, see them face-to-face, and work together with them and with other NGOs. They should have some courage

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in clarifying the problems to refugees. There still isn't enough cooperation between NGOs. It would be better if NGOs shared their experiences and their common interests more, and pushed local authorities about their legal duties.

D: I would tell them that they have to make it clear to refugees that they are trying to support them, but the decision on their case is the UNHCR's not the NGO's. They should express themselves that way -- that they are not there to decide the case and that they are also unhappy about the delay in the case. The client will then

complain not about the NGO office, but about the UNHCR.

M: Be sure to use interpreters from the same communities as the refugees. There are many Sudanese refugees who are rejected because they don't understand the accent of the interpreter. The UNHCR in Ankara should find a Sudanese interpreter because there are many complaints from Sudanese that they don't understand the Arabic interpreter there. Also, make sure that interpreters are paid well, because the situation in Turkey is getting more and more expensive year by year.

The hardest thing for me is when I hear about refugees' situation and I can't do more to help them get out of it. You see your limitations.

My Country's Top Ten: Democratic Republic of Congo

(by a group of minor refugees living in Istanbul)

1. We are ranked the third biggest country in Africa, and the largest French-speaking country.
2. We have a huge equatorial forest, which expands over two-thirds of Africa.
3. In our national parks, you'll find all kinds of animals, including the "okapi," which only exists in Congo and the lion-eating monkey.
4. We have the Atlantic Ocean, a river, and a lake with the largest number of fish in the world.
5. We have abundant resources, such as minerals. In the East of the country, there are big diamonds, gold, uranium, cobalt, etc.
6. We also have the Inga dam, which can supply all of Africa.
7. The Congolese people are very welcoming. It is a very pleasant country to live in when there is peace.
8. In Congo, we like music, studies, and leisure activities.
9. But at the moment, the country is at war, and the population is getting more impoverished each day. Every day, children become orphans and women become widows.
10. Ultimately, we need peace. We are really tired by the problem of war.





My Perfect Life

how an Afghani artist for President Karzai ended up in Van

Raouf Ghasemi

It can be said that life is a kind of prison, a kind of exile, or perhaps a gradual death. It's like being tortured without any physical traces, and it burns you from the inside. Then, when you discover what's happening to you, your sight becomes weak, and your hair falls out, and you cannot sleep any more. You become nervous. A part of your face or body is out of control. You are not

offended by anyone, but you feel upset. You cry without reason. You have thousands of abilities but you cannot use any of them.

This is all because you had a beautiful life and you lost it. Now you have nothing.

This is my refugee life in Van.

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My father had an art studio in Bakr Abad, Herat, Afghanistan. At

that time I was working with my father; I was always proud of him. In 1994, I found an artist by the name of Kazem Eyni in Mashhad, Iran and he sent me some documents that allowed me to enter Iran and stay for a month. I went to Iran in 1996. Mr. Eyni gave me work in one of his apartments. In the beginning I painted, and worked with wood figures, earthenware and stucco. In the summer of

my perfect life

that year, Mr. Eyni enrolled me in the Amir Kabir night school with his son's ID card and the name of Naser Eyni.

In 1997 my family came to Mashhad because they couldn't live in Afghanistan either. It was the beginning of Taliban regime. I rented a house on Muslem Street for my family and me. I graduated from secondary school and enrolled in Haj Taqi night high school in the autumn of 1999. After some time, I become an assistant and started teaching. In January 2003, I participated in an exhibition of art in Mashhad. Two days before the opening, Mr. Toryalai, Afghanistan's consul, called me and said that I would be given a pavilion in the exhibition. They requested that I make a picture for the President, Hamid Karzai. I met Abdullah Abdullah, the foreign minister, and Mustafa Kazimi, the

commerce minister, and they invited me to work in the presidency hall.

I returned to my country in 2004 and I made a perfect life for myself and worked on many projects for the government. I worked for many important people, including the Minister of Defense. But then in the autumn of 2007, I had to leave my home and immigrate to Iran again. Someone stole the files and photos from my laptop and made an anti-régime CD. The regime took revenge on me and destroyed my life. So in the autumn of 2007, I had to leave my home and go to Iran again. I was not allowed to work there and they tried to deport me. So I was smuggled to Turkey. I'm in Van now, recognized as a refugee, and waiting for resettlement in Australia.

In the beginning, I painted and worked with wood figures, earthen-ware and stucco.



Darfur Days

Sudanese minors talk about their country and their dreams

I would like to see justice in Darfur. If I were a leader there, I would help all the children complete their education.



I am 17 years old. I am interested in drawing and football and the Arabic language. When I was a kid, I studied the Koran at a mosque. I grew up in South Darfur, Western Sudan. The capital of my state is Niyala City. I was forced to flee my village because there was war and genocide in our region. Our people are Muslim, and for a long time we have been interested in the Koran. But we have no relationship with Arab tribes. My family is still living there, but I have no connection with them right now. We are five brothers and three sisters. My sister lives in bad conditions with my sick mother. My father died a long time ago because of the intense war in Darfur. Life is very hard in Africa. There is hunger and war, and all at the same time. For that reason, I became a refugee. This was not my expectation but it is what happened to me. I want to grow up in a healthy environment because I lost my education and everything and I was forced to leave my country. It was not good for my childhood. I

suffered a lot in my life when I was in Sudan, but I hope that the future will be bright and better.

I am 16 years old. I want to live in a secure place. After I'm in a resettlement country, I want to finish my education and work as a community worker. I will do my work as a positive person. God knows, I have a good plan for my future. I want to give you a flashback from my country. The regime in my country is a dictatorship. Darfuri people don't have any right to go to school or to learn like other Arab people-- because of the racism in Sudan. The people who are ruling Sudan are mostly from Arab tribes. As African tribes in Darfur, we are forbidden to integrate into any activities in Sudan. African tribes don't have any rights to work in the government, because we are black. We are from the West of Sudan. Most of the tribes in Darfur have African roots. We don't have good relations with Arab people. Most of the people in Darfur don't

Darfur days

Our people don't have power to affect the government. They don't even have enough food to eat.

have the right to education because the people from the North control Sudan. When I grow up, I would like to change that and help our people, especially those from Darfur because most of them are poor. I would also like to work as a peacemaker in that region and the rest of the country. I would like to see justice in Darfur. If I could be a leader there, I would take all the children so that they could complete their education. But I would also help all the countries in the world. If they resettle me in another country, I will work as a volunteer in any NGO so I can help other people in need. And here, I need to stay thank you to NGOs that are helping refugees here in Turkey. Thank you so much.

I am from Darfur and we are suffering in our country. There is no justice there. There are a lot of problems and there are no solutions right now. Our people are suffering from the government. They don't have power to affect the government. They don't even have enough food to eat. All the world is watching what is going on, but they don't help. Most of our village was burned and nobody helped us either. The people don't have power. We only can complain to God. All those problems came to us from North Sudan. I'm not a politician. There are a lot of things I don't understand. There are people who understand, but they haven't explained it to us. Now, I live on my own and I depend on myself.

My Country's Top Ten: Afghanistan

(by a group of minor refugees living in Istanbul)

1. The weather is good.
2. People do not have the opportunity to live an easy life.
3. There are touristy places, such as Bamiyan and Khazney.
4. Afghan people are hospitable -- if you do not fall into the hands of the Taliban.
5. The government is not disciplined and there is no order.
6. There is no security.
7. The economy is very weak and the people are jobless.
8. The educational system is very weak and the people are not well-educated.
9. There are four major ethnicities: Hazari, Pashtu, Tajik and Uzbek.
10. Afghanistan is the number one opium growing country in the world.



Across the Border

Iranian refugees describe their experiences in eastern Turkey's Van



We have no country. There is no place for us in Van or Iran-- where do we go to have stability?

Van, one of the closest cities in Turkey to the Iranian border, has become a hub for exiles from Iran. It currently hosts about 2,000 asylum seekers and refugees, most of whom are Iranian. While some arrived following last year's election turmoil, most have been in Turkey for years. We visited Van to hear why they fear returning to Iran and what their experiences have been in Turkey.

Mehrad

First you must know: we are all losing time, and we are aging. Waiting such for such a long time makes us hopeless and aimless. Nobody came to Van for fun. Everyone came because of problems in Iran. Life was better in Iran, but we faced death and violence if we stayed. It is hard enough starting from zero. We lose hope and power, and the main problem is the UNHCR.

Ali

I applied to the UNHCR in 1999. I failed the first interview. I was smuggled to France and lived there for two or three years but I was deported back to Van in 2005. I also applied to the Swiss and Belgium UNHCR offices. There was injustice all the time. Officers laughed at me at the jail in Belgium. I lost a child in France because of lack of medical care. I was arrested in Charles de Gaulle in Paris, handcuffed and

had to carry my bags with my bloody hands. There is no justice in France. I am an innocent person, I did no harm and I am not a smuggler. I faced injustice in Iran, but the other countries are the same. France deported me. I ran to Belgium and was arrested again. I am a pure Muslim. I prayed in jail, and they sent a priest to help. If there is justice, why did they ask me to change my religion? They must help me for my humanity, not my religion.

Rahim

I have no answers, but I am not alone. There are many with no hope and no answers. I love Iran but I am against the regime. We are fighting for political reasons so we can't go back.

Amina

I have no husband and three children. After two years we in Van, we were denied refugee status. We waited two more years for the second interview. They closed our

across the border

case seven months ago. There is no hope, no future. Why must we wait seven years to get negative results? The children are depressed, the UNHCR is bad and unjust--nobody cares. I married my daughter to another refugee. I have a young boy at school. But there is no future for us here, there are no jobs and no money. No husbands, either. There isn't any opportunity to live like a person. We are oppressed. We love our country and we just want to live life like any other human being. We have no country. There is no place for us in Van or Iran--where do we go to have stability? Some refugees go to Iran after being declined status. But I cannot.

Fersona

I was denied refugee status after three or four months. I waited many months for the second interview, and I got a negative response after four days. Three years later, I got a notice of deportation after my case was closed. They deported me to Iran

and I was sent to jail by the intelligence agency. An attorney set the bail at \$15,000 for my release until the trial date. I ran away again to Van. I am a client of hCa, they helped protect me. But the UNHCR hasn't reopened my case. I face death if I am deported. I am a women's rights activist. There is no hope. I have had many interviews but nothing happens. In 2005, the Iranian secret service attacked my house in Van but were captured by the Turkish police and sent back to Iran. I want to know: Does the EU accept refugees? Nobody knows. Life as a refugee is even harder when you are a woman alone. They compared one woman here to Florence Nightingale because she visits other refugees "giving them hope and advice." But even her own case seems hopeless and lost.

Young Woman

I suspected my husband of being an agent for the Iranian Intelligence Agency. I wanted to

get a divorce, but a woman can't obtain a divorce according to Iranian laws. I was going to be arrested so I fled Iran for my honor and my life. I went to Van. I came across the mountains with my two brothers. But stress and bad behavior made us separate. I was denied refugee status after eight months. Every day I followed my case and went to the UNHCR office in Van. I pushed them to get my rights and I got a positive response because of this. Now I am waiting for a response from the US. My mother is in the US. Anywhere I live, I will be hopeful. My brother needs medical help. As a political activist, he was thrown in an Iranian prison where he became addicted to drugs. My other brother fled to Greece. My sister is married in England. We lie to my mother now about our lives. It is hard on her. My father was an important politician in Iran and was jailed. I think my marriage was a way for intelligence to infiltrate the family.

Everyone came to Van because of problems in Iran. Life was better in Iran, but we faced death and violence if we stayed.



My Country's Top Ten: Iran

(by Mehrad, a refugee living in Van)



1. Iran is a four season country. You can swim in the South Sea in December and can ski in the northern mountains in July.
2. Iran has many unique agricultural areas: a jungle that goes under water half the day, an island with 100 water dams, hot water springs in the mountains, a Mediterranean climate in the north, deserts that have never seen rain, one of the highest mountains. Not even Iranians have seen all of the beautiful places in Iran.
3. Iran has the second largest gas mines in the world, fifth largest petroleum deposits, fourth biggest copper mines, as well as zinc, aluminium, coal, iron, and much more. Iran is a very rich country.
4. Iran's population is 70 million, with more than 100 different cultures, 50 different languages, and 200 different accents.
5. Iran is one of oldest cradles of civilization. Many English words came from Persian. Iran was once the biggest empire of all time.
6. Iran has faced many disasters and many sad stories. 500 years ago Arabs captured our country, but still we are Iranians. 200 years ago Mongols captured these lands, but still Iranian society is mostly Aryan and Persian. Egypt was destroyed and no evidence of the great Egyptian empire exists, but Iran is still Iran.
7. Iranian people have their own customs and ceremonies, but they are modern. They combine western technology and life with eastern customs and habits. Iranians accept modernity and new life easily.
8. Iranians have a very warm and nice hospitality. They love foreigners and live in an open culture, and open their arms to accept other peoples and cultures.
9. Iran is the biggest Shiite country in the world but most Iranians are not serious about religion and mainly only believe in God. Most Iranians have sympathy for Zoroastrian and ancient Iranian culture, and every Iranian has a deep will and wish in their heart to see Iran as a Persian, Aryan and Zoroastrian country -- like the Median empire again.
10. Iran is my country and I am proud to be born Iranian.