Interpreting in a refugee context:
Guidelines for the field on recruitment procedures, conditions of service, training and supervision of interpreters

I. Introduction

1. Interpreters perform a key role in many UNHCR Offices. They are essential to UNHCR’s work in discharging its core mandate functions, including registration, refugee status determination, resettlement and counseling on issues relating to sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) which are generally regarded as sensitive. The quality of interpretation has an important impact on the quality of UNHCR work in these areas.

2. The identification of qualified interpreters is frequently a challenging task for UNHCR. In the absence of other qualified persons, interpreters can often only be drawn from the refugee community, which may give rise to issues of confidentiality and impartiality. Insufficient number of female interpreters may hamper the implementation of gender-sensitive policies established by the Office. Inadequate conditions of service, limited training and insufficient supervision may impact on their performance.

3. As a result of their critical role, interpreters are in a position of significant influence and power over persons of concern. Although most interpreters discharge their functions in a professional manner in keeping with their terms of reference, this power has at times been abused to the detriment of refugees as well as UNHCR’s overall program integrity. Fraud perpetrated by interpreters can occur in many different ways. Clear terms of reference, standard operating procedures and ongoing compliance monitoring and oversight are required to reduce the risk of abuse.

4. To facilitate high quality interpretation and to limit the risk of abuse, interpreters need to be managed appropriately. The purpose of these guidelines is to provide guidance to Field Offices in managing interpreters and reduce the risks of misrepresentation or fraud that might originate from their use in UNHCR operations. It elaborates on four main topics, namely:
   - recruitment procedures for interpreters,
   - conditions of service,
   - training, and
   - supervision.

5. These guidelines complement more specific guidance on interpreters contained in other UNHCR documents, including, among others, the UNHCR RSD Procedural Standards, the Resettlement Handbook, the Handbook for Registration and the Guidelines for Prevention and Response to Sexual and
Gender-Based violence against Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons.¹

6. The guidelines shall apply to all persons recruited by UNHCR to work as interpreters when communicating with persons of concern, regardless of whether they work full or part-time or whether they may or may not be required to also do translations. Parts of the guidelines may also be useful for interpreters working for UNHCR in its interactions with authorities, NGOs or other actors as well as for translators. Only parts 2 and 4 apply to interpreters recruited as UNHCR staff members.

7. Most parts of the guidelines shall also apply in emergencies. However, recruitment procedures (paragraphs 14-17) as well as the induction training (paragraph 29) may be simplified if justified by operational constraints. As soon as an emergency phase is over, the guidelines should be strictly adhered to in their entirety.

II. Recruitment procedures

8. In addition to identifying the candidate with the most suitable language skills, the selection of interpreters needs to take into account ethical considerations, and in particular, the ability of the candidate to remain neutral and impartial when carrying out his or her interpretation tasks. Other issues to consider include fraud prevention and the need to limit security risks to a minimum.

9. In this context, the candidates’ nationality, ethnicity, gender and legal status in the country are important factors to consider, although the weight of each factor will depend on the areas in which the interpreter will mainly be working.

10. In the case of interpreters to be used in refugee status determination and resettlement processing, it is generally preferable to employ nationals of the host country or non-refugees with a legal status in the host country.

11. There are, however, situations in which UNHCR has no choice but to employ persons from the refugee community, as no other persons with the necessary language skills are available. In these situations, UNHCR should make every effort to employ refugees who have a legal status in the host country allowing them to work, or refugees who have been accepted for resettlement to a third country and are awaiting travel. UNHCR should minimize the use of asylum-seekers as much as possible and avoid completely the use of rejected asylum-seekers as interpreters. If no interpreters can be identified, consideration should be

¹ See UNHCR, Procedural Standards for RSD under UNHCR’s Mandate, in particular at 2.5.1–7; UNHCR, Resettlement Handbook, at 5.5.3 and 7.6; UNHCR, Handbook for Registration, provisional release, September 2003 at 13, 121, 155, and at Annex 10(a): Sample Standard Operating Procedures for Reception at pages 1 and 4; UNHCR, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence against Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons, at 29 and 120. See also UNHCR, Guidelines on international protection: Gender-Related Persecution within the context of Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention and/or its 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refuges, May 2002 at 36 (iii).
given to conducting interviews through teleconference, by using interpreters available in other field locations.

12. Where interpreters are used for counseling on issues relating to sexual and gender-based violence, interpreters of the same sex as the survivor should be used. In order to preserve confidentiality, preference should be given to employing an interpreter who does not come from within the same refugee community.

13. Field offices should ensure that a sufficient number of female interpreters is recruited in order to meet registration and RSD processing requirements as well as counseling work relating to the prevention and response to sexual and gender-based violence. In situations where, due to cultural factors or limited access to education by women, there are no sufficient qualified female interpreters, UNHCR should be proactive in developing capacity at the field level by encouraging education initiatives or initiating on-the-job training programs for potential female interpreters.

14. In general terms, recruitment processes depend on the type of contract issued to the interpreter. Recruitment procedures should include advertisement of the vacancy (depending upon the location, this may be done through advertisement in targeted papers, notices on boards in refugee camps, etc.) short-listing of applicants, the conduct of interviews by a panel appointed by the Head of Office to check their skills and qualifications and to undertake security and reference checks.

a) Language tests

15. Adequate oral proficiency (speaking and understanding speech) is a prerequisite for anyone wishing to serve as an interpreter. If multiple languages are involved, it is essential that the applicant’s ability in each language be assessed, especially those in which the applicant may have more limited proficiency. Except where certified interpreters are recruited, language tests should be undertaken to certify the candidates’ knowledge in all the languages for which they will be used as interpreters. The test may take the form of an oral interview (in person or over the phone) between the candidate and the interviewer(s), at the end of which the interviewer(s) give(s) a broad assessment of the candidate’s language skills (i.e., native, excellent, good, adequate, poor). If possible, interviewer(s) who speak(s) all of the candidate’s working languages should be utilized. Where internal expertise is not available, UNHCR offices may seek assistance from the Resident Coordinator’s office, a national accredited language institution or other partners. As, in many cases, interpreters will also be asked to translate simple texts and to do sight translations (i.e. written to oral), it is recommended that their ability in this domain also be tested. A simple method to do this is to use an actual text commonly encountered in the work the interpreter will have to perform.

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b) Ethics tests

16. To work as an interpreter for UNHCR, understanding of ethical principles and sensitivity to cultural issues is extremely important and should therefore be included in the selection tests. Cultural sensitivity could be assessed through a case study, for instance a concrete situation that has caused misunderstanding in the past. Another possibility is to ask the candidate to describe a cultural belief, value, or practice that is important in the culture of the person for whom he/she will interpret that he/she thinks may cause misunderstandings. Ethical principles and sensitivity to cultural issues may be tested through the use of a case study, which allows the interviewer to identify how the candidate would react when faced with an ethical dilemma and how well the candidate understands the code of ethics. The UNHCR Code of Conduct and the attached Undertaking of Confidentiality and Impartiality (Annex 2) should be shared with candidates prior to the initial assessment to allow them to prepare themselves for the interview. The following are two examples of case studies, whereby a range of answers may be acceptable as long as the candidate demonstrates a good understanding of the ethical issues at stake:

(1) In an interview for refugee status, in which you were the interpreter, a woman reported on abuses by her husband. You walk out of the UNHCR Office and the husband of the woman approaches you to ask what his wife said during the interview for refugee status. What do you do?

(2) A refugee who is waiting for a resettlement interview asks you what questions the UNHCR officer will ask and seeks your advice on what he should reply. What do you tell him?

c) Security and reference checks

17. To ensure the security of refugees, it is mandatory for field offices to undertake proper security checks on selected candidates, including criminal record, past violent behavior, past misconduct, etc. Such checks should essentially consist in contacting U.N. agencies, NGOs or other previous employers. In addition, depending on the country situation, checks may be undertaken with national police authorities to verify candidate’s antecedents.

III. Conditions of employment and service

a) The need for formal contractual arrangement

18. In order to ensure that interpretation services provided to UNHCR are of high quality as well as to prevent fraud, ad hoc arrangements with interpreters whereby they are formally regarded as volunteers should normally be avoided. Interpreters should be issued formal contracts which should include, as a minimum:

- The duration of the contract;
- The terms of reference, specifying duties and responsibilities as well as working hours;
- The remuneration and modalities of payment (i.e. per hour, week, month);
- The conditions of service: for Individual Contractors’ contracts, field offices may provide for annual or sick leave, if this is deemed necessary due to local customs;
Signed copies of the Undertaking of Confidentiality and Impartiality and UNHCR’s Code of Conduct, and a confirmation that the Secretary-General Bulletin, ST/SGB/2003/13 of 9 October 2003 concerning “Special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse” has been read and understood.

19. Interpreters should receive a financial compensation by UNHCR for their services. In-kind payments should be avoided. Field offices should therefore budget for this under their projects.

20. Each office must find a consistent approach with regards to contracts for interpreters. The same type of contract should be used for those working in the same country unless different treatment is justified by objective reasons, such as differences in duties and responsibilities. While the offices are encouraged to use the Individual Contractor’s contract for interpreters, other contractual options may be possible depending on the circumstances. In addition to the Individual Contractor’s contract, offices may decide to employ interpreters as regular staff, including Fixed-Term appointments (FTAs), or use UNOPS or UNV contracts. If the interpretation services are provided by a company, the procedures included in Chapter VIII of the UNHCR Manual should be followed.

21. An interpreter hired under an Individual Contractor’s contract may be hired for up to a maximum period of 9 work-months in a 12-month period. This means that the total accumulation (calculated by adding the actual number of working hours, days, weeks, or months as appropriate) of all contracts with an interpreter within the 12 months immediately following the start date of his/her first contract cannot exceed 9 months in total. After the 12-month period has expired, the interpreter can be re-hired taking into account the same time limitation.

22. This time limitation should be strictly observed, in order to avoid neglect, abuse and burn-outs. To allow for the maximum flexibility, the contract should be issued for the shortest period in which the interpreter’s services are needed. In this connection, the offices are advised to plan in advance and prepare back-ups as necessary.

23. There may be instances where the individual that the Office plans to hire as an interpreter may not be entitled to work according to host country legislation, as

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3 See United Nations, Administrative Instructions ST/AI/1999/7 of 25 August 1999 as last amended on 15 March 2006 (ST/AI/1999/7/Amend.1 effective 1 April 2006) concerning, “Consultants and individual contractors”. Individual contractors contracts replace previously used special service agreements (see Section 5.1).


7 The time-limitation does not apply if a person is engaged on a unit-cost basis, such as would be the case for translators paid by number of words or pages. See United Nations, Administrative Instructions quoted in footnote 3, Section 8.3.
may be the case for persons coming from the refugee community. While UN staff is immune from immigration restrictions and alien registration, such privilege does not extend to individual contractors, unless otherwise provided by host country agreements.

24. If UNHCR has no other viable option than to select as an interpreter an individual who has no right to work in the host country, all possible efforts should be made by the Office to negotiate the issuance of a work permit to the person concerned on exceptional grounds on the basis of existing national law provisions. For example, if the obstacle relates to a lack of the right to stay in the country, a legalization of status with the authorities should be pursued by promoting, for instance, the application to the specific person of provisions allowing for a right to stay based on humanitarian or exceptional considerations.

b) Undertaking of Confidentiality and Impartiality and Code of Conduct

25. Interpreters have to agree in advance that they will respect the principle of confidentiality, remain impartial and will uphold the highest standards of efficiency, competence and integrity in their work. Every person engaged by UNHCR to provide interpretation services shall sign the Undertaking of Confidentiality and Impartiality attached as Annex 2. In addition, every interpreter should be given the UNHCR Code of Conduct for non-staff personnel and asked to sign it. Interpreters should be included in refresher courses organized at the field level on the Code of Conduct.

c) Welfare issues

26. The work of interpreters could lead to burnout. The experience of regularly hearing about atrocities and violence committed against others may also impact on their emotional state. Supervisors should give due consideration to the interpreters' psychosocial well-being in order to prevent burnout and to help limit fraud and security risks. At a minimum, interpreters should undergo security and trauma preparation including understanding the basics of the prevention of stress and trauma. Their access to on-going psychosocial support available to the protection team in the operation should be facilitated. In order to manage the level of their exposure to the traumatic events, mechanisms should be introduced in the office, whereby interpreters can alternate interpretation and translation work and rotate between RSD, resettlement and community services work whenever possible.

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8 See 1946 Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations, Article V, Section 18(d).
9 See supra at footnote 6, Section 6.1 read in conjunction with Section 5.4.
10 The content of the Undertaking essentially corresponds to UNHCR interpreter undertaking included in the UNHCR Procedural Standards for RSD under UNHCR’s Mandate as annex 2.1.
12 The CD Rom “Basic security in the field” provides basic information on stress and trauma in the field. See also the Staff Welfare Section publication “Traumatic Stress Reactions: An Informative and Educative Guide for the Survivors of Traumatic Event” which can be found in the internal version of Refworld in English, French and Spanish. Staff Welfare Section can be contacted for more information (HQSW00@unhcr.org).
d) Personnel file

27. A personnel file shall be kept in the relevant office for each interpreter. The file should include at a minimum the following information: personal history form (CV), certifications of language skills, documentation of the ethics test (as per paragraph 16 above) and security check, terms of reference, copy of the contract specifying working hours and remuneration paid, signed copies of the Undertaking of Confidentiality and Impartiality and of the Code of Conduct form, attendance sheets and documentation of performance evaluations.

e) Making UNHCR interpreters available for other users

28. At times, UNHCR may decide to make its interpreters available to other users. This is often the case in the context of resettlement. If UNHCR interpreters are provided to support the processing by resettlement countries, care must be taken to avoid a perception of preferential treatment being accorded to refugee interpreters. As an anti-fraud measure, care should also be taken to avoid that the same interpreters who assisted the adjudication of the UNHCR resettlement case interprets for the same case when interviewed by a resettlement country. In the same vein, only those interpreters who are non-refugees or who have already been accepted for resettlement should be made available for such purposes. UNHCR should also clarify that any form of compensation paid by resettlement countries or other partners for services provided by a UNHCR interpreter are compatible with the type of contract they hold and do not create expectations from UNHCR.

IV. Training

a) Mandatory induction training

29. Following their recruitment, interpreters shall be provided with an induction training which should include, among other things, basic information on UNHCR, specialized terminology (see the UNHCR Thesaurus), content of their work, clarification of their role, content of the UNHCR Code of Conduct, ST/SGB/2003/13 and the Undertaking of Confidentiality and Impartiality, security briefing, and, if necessary, some basic interpretation training. For the latter the UNHCR Training module “Interpreting in a Refugee Context” UNHCR Training module "Interpreting in a Refugee Context”\(^\text{13}\) should be utilized.

b) Regular training

30. Even the most skilled interpreter will need to expand his or her vocabulary through training and ongoing study. Field offices should therefore provide for opportunities for interpreters to improve their knowledge, skills and vocabulary. Each office should ensure that interpreters have access to a set of dictionaries purchased by the office and, where possible, a standalone PC to practice their writing skills. Field offices should consider including interpreters in relevant training activities organized by the office, so that interpreters better understand UNHCR’s focus.

31. Field Offices may explore with local institutions, particularly universities, the possibility of collaborating in regard to the training of interpreters. An example of

\(^{13}\) RLD 3, revised version forthcoming in 2009.
such collaboration is the establishment at the American University in Cairo of a capacity building program for refugee interpreters, including training courses, development of linguistic reference materials and glossaries of legal aid terms.\(^\text{14}\)

V. Supervision

a) Designating a responsible person

32. The substantive line officer(s) in the area(s) of work concerned are responsible to supervise the interpreters they use. Regular meetings with interpreters and their supervisors may be held, where appropriate. At the same time, in order to ensure that issues relating to interpreters, including those set out in the Guidelines are properly and consistently monitored, co-ordinated and managed across the operation, Field Offices should designate a focal point, normally the Administration or Human Resources Officer. The ultimate responsibility for the conditions of work for the interpreters rests with the Representative.

b) Regular performance evaluations

33. The interpreter’s performance should be evaluated on a regular basis. For this purpose and unless otherwise required by the type of contract held, the form attached as Annex 3 may be used. Performance assessment should put less emphasis on the basic skills that have already been determined and more emphasis on the interpreter’s actual job performance and adherence to professional standards in his or her daily activities. In addition, in particular when there are doubts about the integrity or quality of the work of one or more individual interpreters, it is strongly recommended that UNHCR conducts ad hoc checks. They could consist of recording selected conversations and interviews to ensure that the interpretation has been accurate.

c) Access to individual files of persons of concern

34. Interpreters should not have access to general file storage areas. Interpreters should not handle individual files of persons of concern. Where interpreters have exceptionally been assigned additional tasks which require access to individual files, this should be strictly limited to what is necessary to carry out authorized responsibilities, and should be closely supervised. Interpreters should not be allowed to maintain records of their dealings with asylum-seekers and refugees and should be asked to destroy their notes at the end of the interpretation or to put these notes in the case file, if they may be useful for review purposes in future.

d) Reporting interferences

35. Field Offices can also consider establishing a focal point (usually the supervisor) to whom all interpreters have the duty to report any interference (including perceived fraud) with their work, such as undue approach by asylum seekers or refugees either inside or outside the office, by e-mail or by phone. The established procedures should also contemplate the possibility of an interpreter to disqualify himself/herself from interpreting for an individual if he/she has a

\(^{14}\) More information on this project can be found on the website of the American University in Cairo at http://www.aucegypt.edu/ResearchatAUC/rc/cmrss/ccip/Pages/default.aspx.
personal link with him/her or if there are other grounds undermining the interpreter’s neutrality.

**e) Complaint procedures**

36. Complaint procedures established in each UNHCR office to provide persons of concern to UNHCR with an opportunity to report misconduct of UNHCR staff should be used also to channel comments and complaints about the services of interpreters. Field offices should be aware of the potential danger in having interpreters translate complaint letters. The UNHCR Procedural Standards for RSD under UNHCR’s Mandate at Unit 2.6 may provide guidance on this issue. Field offices, may also consider numbering all complaint letters submitted in a language that requires translation, so as to allow tracing of the letters if needed. As any other individual, interpreters have the right to file a complaint regarding alleged improper conduct of persons having a direct contractual link with UNHCR to the Inspector’s General Office.