

## Bringing justice to the world through the translated word

When the European Court of Human Rights delivered judgments on the first six Chechen cases against Russia in February 2005, the European Human Rights Advocacy Centre (EHRAC), which handled the cases, had a long list of people to thank for their assistance in achieving this great victory, among them were many volunteer translators.

The issue of human rights is one that many consider to be of great importance for the common good. Therefore, when it comes to translating legal documents related to human rights violations, this does not only offer the usual benefit of brushing-up on foreign language skills, but also an enormous personal reward. Taking part in bringing justice to the world is one of the main reasons why human rights non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are fortunate in recruiting professional translators to provide their services on a voluntary basis.

EHRAC is a tiny (three full-time and two part-time staff) self-funding, NGO-type unit, with very limited resources based at London Metropolitan University. Its primary aims are to assist individuals, lawyers and NGOs within Russian and the South Caucasus to take cases to the European Court of Human Rights through knowledge transfer partnerships and to build the capacity of the local human rights communities in these countries.

EHRAC is currently working on around 275 cases against Russia, Georgia and Azerbaijan before the European Court (with 68 victories since its inception eight years ago). As such there is a constant flow of case documents that require translation from Russian, Georgian and Azerbaijani into English in order that EHRAC's legal experts can provide advice to colleagues working on the ground in target countries. The cases that we assist with cover many issues ranging from torture and extrajudicial killings to freedom of expression and assembly.

### Helping those affected by the 2008 Russian-Georgia conflict



One example of our work is to help nearly 150 Georgians who allege that Russia committed serious violations of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) during the August 2008 Russia-Georgia armed conflict. Among these people are Tsitsino Kushashvili, an elderly resident of Gori, who saw her daughter killed by a falling bomb on 9 August 2010. Her home was also destroyed.

Photo: The aftermath of bombings in Gori, Georgia

*"The planes flew at very low altitude; so low that I was scared they would hit the building roof accidentally. There are eight apartment blocks around my house and the planes were cruising above them. They made two circles and on the third one they started to drop bombs."*

*"I saw lots of people lying on the ground. I saw my neighbour, Zviad Razmadze, who was injured. I turned him on his back but could not find out whether he was dead or alive. Suddenly I heard another injured neighbour, Zoya Muradov, calling my name and I rushed to help her, but then I saw my daughter (Maya) and my grandson (Giviko) also lying on the ground. I ran to them and when I came closer I saw that my daughter was lying over Giviko. She turned onto her back. Her head had been injured by shrapnel and she was bleeding severely. She was dying. The piece of shrapnel was large, around 20 cm in size. It was metal and when I touched it was still hot. Maya did not respond to me. I started to shout: 'Help! My daughter needs help!' and then I heard Giviko saying 'Grandma, help me, my leg hurts'. I looked at him and saw that he had a large piece of shrapnel in his right leg and he was also bleeding. Then I started to ask for help for Giviko because I realised that Maya was going to die anyway." Tsitsino Kushashvili*

## Desperately seeking Azerbaijani translators

Whilst we are always very pleased to hear from Russian and Georgian speakers we are currently in particular need of Azerbaijani translators. EHRAC only very recently launched its work in Azerbaijan, but is already cooperating with three local NGOs. Consequently, we urgently need to translate case documents from Azerbaijani into English, but have no base of translators on which we can call.

Our efforts to find Azerbaijani translators so far have been almost entirely unsuccessful. We did not anticipate the difficulty of finding Azerbaijani translators or the extremely high cost of Azerbaijani translation compared to Russian and Georgian - we cannot compete with oil company translation rates! As a small, underfunded NGO we rely on the goodwill of our many kind volunteers. We only pay a few of our long-term translators a discounted rate for quality work delivered to tight deadlines.

However, given our current circumstances, if you are able to offer Azerbaijani translation, but do not feel in a position to assist us on a voluntary basis then we would consider paying a modest fee should you complete a test translation to our satisfaction. We pay our most experienced Russian translators up to £50 per 1,000 words, higher rates may be negotiable for experienced professional translators. Unfortunately, due to prohibitive bank transfer costs we can only extend this offer to translators whom we can pay in the UK.

## The kind of people we help

### Property rights in North Ossetia

Following the 1992 conflict between ethnic Ingush and Ossetians in the Prigorodny District of North Ossetia-Alania, thousands of homes (primarily belonging to ethnic Ingush) were destroyed and the majority of the Ingush population was displaced. Very few of them have been able to return to their homes to this day. Although these people entitled to State support many face bureaucratic problems in accessing it. We are assisting some of these people to take cases to the European Court.

*"For 17 years I have been desperately trying to obtain a just solution to my problems within Russia by applying to all court instances, but I haven't succeeded. All that has happened is that I have suffered more psychologically, physically and financially. "Now I have a wife and two young children to whom I cannot leave my home as I have no faith in the future. It is important for my whole family that the European Court issues a fair judgment in my case, as it is the final instance and the final hope that justice really does exist."*

Ali Murzabekov, European Court applicant



### Disappearance in Chechnya

*"I will remember September 2002 for the rest of my life. My three children and I lost our husband and father. This happened in broad daylight in the centre of Urus-Martan. They burst into our yard and took my husband away. Just like that. He disappeared. People ask me who did it. I tell them that the people who did it are those who could arrive in armoured personnel carriers and Ural trucks and then leave in the direction of the military headquarters in front of the eyes of the whole neighbourhood."*

*I think it is obvious who detained my husband. I thought they would release him. But I lost all hope when the investigator gave me a document from the criminal case file and said: "Nurzhan, keep this. I can't do anything. Maybe there will be a time when this paper will help you find out what happened to your husband."*

*Maybe people can appreciate what a woman who is left alone with three young children among post-war ruins feels like. Then, I contacted EHRAC-Memorial asking to apply to the European Court.*

*Now after having won my family's case at the European Court I want to express my gratitude once again to all those who have helped make this happen."*

Nurzhan Abdulkadyrova  
(*Abdulkadyrova & Others v Russia*)

Photo: A temporary home built by an Ingush family on the site of their house, which was destroyed during the Prigorodny conflict.

## **What translating for us is like**

When translating legal documents, the translator has to strive first and foremost for precision. The translator will have to research the actual meaning of a particular term and then find the most suitable equivalent for terms and concepts, which may not even exist in their native language. Even though the use of legal dictionaries can be of great help, eventually the translator will have to rely upon their own experience to find the best translation. In the absence of any specific legal training the translator has to take great care in translating provisions of laws, names of institutions or references to specific incidents, or abbreviations. EHRAC provides a glossary of terminology, which is distilled from international law-based institutions to encourage uniform transliteration and translation of the documents – an additional benefit to translators wishing to enrich their legal vocabulary.

Witness statements, usually by civilians, contain little technical vocabulary, the content relating mainly to descriptions of people, places and actions. On the other hand, post-mortem reports contain highly specialised vocabulary and sometimes require extensive research. The documents are usually scanned and sent to us by email and arrive in varying states of legibility, whether handwritten or not. Guessing missing letters is a further test of the translator's linguistic, cultural and historical knowledge.

The subject matter of EHRAC's cases is very varied – from environmental pollution, ethnic discrimination to armed conflict – and sometimes unconventional documents such as Soviet era passports, insurance receipts or school reference letters are used as evidence to support cases. When tackling these old documents, which have been copied repeatedly, a certain appreciation of the social, cultural and historic background of the Soviet Union in the 1980s will assist the translator.

It goes without saying that after a while the translator will build up a good idea of how the European Convention system works, as well as the domestic legal systems – even if they previously had no real background in law or human rights.

Any translation work requires the translator to look beyond the actual extract of text into a wider context, which needs to be researched and understood. With EHRAC this is even more so, but all the hard work is rewarded with a solid experience of translating in the area of human rights law which can serve as a good foundation for any further work in this field and, of course, the gratification of working to assist your fellow man. A further benefit for those on the threshold of a translation/interpretation career, EHRAC is able to provide that much needed reference for future paid work.

## **If you are interested**

*If you are interested in becoming an EHRAC volunteer translator (Russian-English, Georgian-English or Azerbaijani-English), please send your CV and a short message detailing your experience and motivations to Tina Devadasan at: [v.devadasan@londonmet.ac.uk](mailto:v.devadasan@londonmet.ac.uk).*