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## They lost limbs serving Canada, now Afghan translators hope to live there

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By Alexander Panetta, The Canadian Press

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan - They lost their limbs serving Canada, and now they're asking to be allowed into the country.

They are among the scores of young Afghan men who have been maimed or killed while working as interpreters for the international armies fighting in their homeland.

They have been shot at, blown up, tortured and threatened.

In at least one case, several interpreters' bodies were strung up in a public square and left to rot there for weeks as a lesson to anyone else thinking of helping the foreigners.

Hasham is one of these young men. One who survived.

Sporting a boyish smile and a late adolescent's peach fuzz, he describes how his future in Afghanistan vanished when a roadside bomb tore off his left leg.

Hasham dragged himself across the carpet in his living quarters Friday, pulled on his only shoe, and hopped up to retrieve a document stored in a safe place by the door.

It is a letter from Canadian soldier Maj. Mike Lake, lauding him for his bravery and loyalty.

Hasham proudly hands over the letter and asks a Canadian journalist to use it to get him into Canada.

When told it's not that simple to immigrate to Canada - there are forms, fees, criteria, and paperwork - he breathes an exasperated sigh.

He keeps hearing the same excuses. There appears to be much bureaucracy in Canada. In his country, a simple phone call and perhaps a small bribe to a well-connected person usually gets the job done.

"I told them - I don't want compensation (for my lost leg)," he says.

"Just take me to Canada."

Being a so-called "terp" is so risky, Canadian soldiers say, they were puzzled when one recently showed up for work wearing a pair of sunglasses and a jubilant grin. They asked why he was smiling.

He replied that he'd lost his eye, and happily declared that the injury had earned him a transfer to a safer post inside the base.

Canadian soldiers are encouraging their Afghan colleagues to start a union, saying it would protect them against

things like arbitrary dismissal or delays in getting insurance payments when they're injured.

But Hasham replies that his only desire now is to live in Canada, either in Saskatchewan or in that "French part" of the country, Quebec.

He knows very little about the country he served for eight months before a homemade bomb blew up his convoy. But he got to know soldiers from those two provinces and grew especially fond of them.

Since the accident in April, Hasham has remained cloistered in a tiny, carpeted room with a half-dozen other men, in the interpreters' living compound next to the military base at Kandahar Airfield.

His mother has no idea about the injury and keeps calling to ask why he won't visit the family home near Kandahar city.

Hasham always has a new excuse: always another mission, always some new patrol out in yet another far-flung region, always an excuse to avoid going home.

"I lie to my mother," he says.

"I say I'm safe. . . It's not good for me to go home - for my neighbours to see me (without a leg)."

Someone might tell the Taliban about the one-legged boy in the neighbourhood who must have been working with the foreigners. He fears they might then harm him or his family.

He still gets his \$600-a-month paycheque, but like many other "terps" injured here, he has been forced to wait for compensation for his lost limb.

At least the salary is good. He says 14 relatives can live on his income, a common scenario in this country where a comparatively fat foreign salary feeds entire families.

The Afghan-born founder of the private company that employs interpreters here - U.S.-based IMS Services - says his employees make extraordinary money for Afghans.

He concedes that the local insurance provider sometimes moves a little too slowly to process claims when they're injured, especially because so many family members rely on his employees' income.

Sonny Achakzai's company employs 1,200 interpreters based out of Kandahar, and a number of the "terps" are his own Afghan relatives. He started off as one of the interpreters for U.S. forces in 2001, and he says the job can be heartbreaking.

"They see their peers killed," Achakzai said in an interview from Los Angeles.

"But they say, 'I'm willing to risk my life so that I can feed my family.'"

The man they call Junior still supports his children with the money he earns at the Canadian provincial reconstruction camp.

The \$8,000 insurance payment he received two years ago - far more than most others get - has been a tremendous help.

But it won't bring his legs back.

Junior was once a forestry worker for the Afghan department of agriculture. He worries that once the Canadians leave his country, he will have no future here.

Now Junior wears a pair of plastic prosthetic legs a few hours a day, but he needs to take them off most of the time because they don't fit very well and they hurt.

He's been asking for two years to come to Canada.

"I'm not a complete man anymore," he says.

"I've got to find a safe place . . . I would have gone to Canada two years ago, the very first day I was injured."

The interpreters here say their colleagues who work with the Americans brag about the fast-track immigration program for exceptional employees.

Junior shares a personal anecdote to illustrate why he's so desperate to leave his country:

In most places on Earth, losing two limbs might earn you some sympathy.

In Afghanistan, it helps identify you as an easy target.

Even after a rocket-propelled grenade slammed into the G-wagon he was riding in, Junior has continued receiving menacing phone calls from anonymous men.

He says one recently told him: "God is mad at you, and you'll go to hell. Stop working with the foreigners, come with us, and God will be happy with you."

To which Junior says he replied: "God's not happy with me? How do you know? You talked to him?"

Canadian soldiers hear these complaints about immigration, and especially about the sporadic disbursement of benefits like injury pay.

Several have urged the "terps" to start a union.

"I told them how easily they could do it," said Cpl. Jason Villeneuve.

"If they just didn't show up for work one day, we'd be (screwed). . . But they're too scared to do anything."

Another soldier has also been pushing the interpreters to seek additional rights, and says a union would be a good start.

In the meantime, Cpl. Tim Laidler says, he hopes the Canadian government finds a way to help injured employees like Hasham.

"I think Canada's morally responsible," said the B.C. native.

"I'm sure if most Canadians heard about this, they'd want that man to be compensated."

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