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Pentagon Urged to Reverse Mask Ban

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13 U.S. Lawmakers Back Iraqi Translators

By Ernesto Londoño
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Thirteen members of Congress and an association of interpreters this week urged [the Pentagon](#) to rescind a policy that prohibits interpreters who work with U.S. troops in Baghdad from wearing ski masks to conceal their identity.

The [U.S. military](#) command for the Baghdad region said it began enforcing the mask ban strictly in September because masked interpreters undermined the professional image the military strives to project. The military also said the sharp reduction in violence in Baghdad has made wearing masks unnecessary.

Sen. [Ron Wyden](#) (D-Ore.) and 12 members of the [House of Representatives](#) on Thursday sent a letter to [Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates](#) urging him to allow interpreters to wear masks.

"Members of Congress were dumbfounded," Wyden said in an interview yesterday. "The Pentagon's position defies common sense."

Pentagon spokesman Lt. Col. Patrick Ryder said he did not know whether Gates had received the lawmakers' letter, and one from a translators association, because the secretary is traveling this week. "If the letters have been received, the secretary will respond appropriately," Ryder said.

Because extremist groups have tortured and executed interpreters who have worked for the U.S. government in Iraq, many go to great lengths to conceal their identity. More than 300 interpreters working with U.S. troops in Iraq have been killed since 2003.

Some interpreters have resigned as a result of the policy, and others have reluctantly shed their masks. Several U.S. soldiers said they were enforcing the policy despite personal misgivings. [The Washington Post](#) on Monday published an article about the policy and the concerns it has generated among soldiers and interpreters.

"There seems to be a disconnect between the command and the people on the ground who appreciate what the interpreters are doing," said Lillian Clementi, a spokeswoman for the American Translators Association, which has more than 10,500 members in 90 countries. "We have received messages from members saying that this is outrageous -- that we have to do something. They're baffled, dismayed and even outraged at this really inexplicable policy."

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