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Unlimited Talk, Only \$679 Million: Inside the No-Bid Deal for Afghan Interpreters

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5/12/2010

Three years ago, Mission Essential Personnel was a miniscule military contractor, banking less than \$6 million annually to find a handful of linguists for the American government. Earlier this week, the U.S. Army handed the Columbus, Ohio, company a one-year, no-bid \$679 million extension of its current contract to field a small city's worth of translators to help out American forces in Afghanistan.

Not bad for a company that's been accused of everything from [abandoning wounded employees](#) to [sending out-of-shape interpreters](#) to the front lines. MEP vigorously rejects the charges.

The U.S.-led counterinsurgency strategy for Afghanistan relies on gaining the trust of the local population. But those relationships can't be established without people who can speak Afghanistan's array of languages. So the American military turns to [Mission Essential Personnel](#) (MEP) to recruit, screen and bring more than 5,000 of those interpreters to the battlefield.

Today, no other company comes close to supplying as many translators in Afghanistan. And with this new "[indefinite-delivery/indefinite-quantity with cost-plus-award fee](#)" contract extension, MEP is guaranteed another year as the [dominant player in the translation market](#) there.

To MEP spokesman Sean Rushton, the \$679 million contract extension is a validation of “our very positive performance” — and a stop-gap measure to ensure that U.S. forces can keep talking with the locals while a more competitive contract is prepared to be put up for bid. Tens of thousands of fresh troops are streaming into Afghanistan for a new offensive there; they need people who can speak the language. “Obviously, this coincides with the surge,” Rushton tells Danger Room.

A small handful of MEP’s translators are American citizens of Afghan descent. If they have the right language skills, and can pass a security clearance, they can make up to [\\$235,000 per year, plus health benefits and a 401-K](#), “analyz[ing] communications” and “[perform\[ing\] document exploitation](#)” on one of Afghanistan’s big, comfortable military bases.

But the vast majority of MEP’s recruits are local Afghans, earning about \$900 a month to accompany frontline troops into action. These interpreters are given a ~~week’s~~ month’s worth of training before they’re shipped out to combat. Once there, they’re required to spend a year working 12-hour days, seven days a week, and be on-call during the remaining time.

It can be a grueling schedule. The work is dangerous — “[some 24 MEP linguists have been killed and 56 injured](#)” in less than two years, CorpWatch’s Pratap Chatterjee reported. Not all of MEP’s hires are up for it.

“In just the bare minimal outlines of how they could run their contract effectively, [they are a resounding failure](#), and have a knack for hiring septuagenarians for combat units while misassigning their language skills,” Registan.net’s Josh Foust complained last summer.

“[I’ve met guys off the planes and have immediately sent them back because they weren’t in the proper physical shape](#),” linguist supervisor Gunnery Sgt. James Spangler told the AP around this same time. “They were too old. They couldn’t breathe. They complained about heart problems,” he said.

But the Army, not MEP, assigns where interpreters go. And the military’s contract doesn’t specify how many pull-ups an MEP translator has to do. Besides, senior citizens can be invaluable in a senior commander’s headquarters, Rushton responds. “All of our linguists meet and exceed the requirements that we were given,” he says.

MEP instantly became Afghanistan’s biggest linguist shop in 2007, after the defense contractor Titan only managed to muster about half of the [translators it promised to the military](#). The U.S. Army Intelligence and Security Command put the translation contract up for competitive bid, and awarded the job to MEP, a startup founded by special forces veterans.

Today, the company, led by former marine and [Blackwater vice president Chris Taylor](#), says it [fills 97 percent of the translators’ billets](#), up from Titan’s 41 percent fulfillment rate.

While MEP hasn’t faced the kind of scrutiny paid to contractors like Blackwater, the firm has come under fire for the treatment of its linguists. Chatterjee reported last year that MEP rehired many of Titan’s old interpreters — and then promptly cut their salaries by as much as 50 percent.

Some were canned, for seemingly flimsy reasons. One linguist, wounded in action, felt he was fired, essentially, for getting hurt.

MEP insists the accusations are way off-base. "We're very committed to making our company a different kind of company. To giving these guys better treatment," Rushton says. "We bend over backwards to provide benefits and medical care."

But, according to Chatterjee, MEP's record of caring for injured translators is far from perfect. When interpreter Abdul Hameed was wounded by an improvised bomb last August, MEP made sure he received disability pay. But it was only "\$110.01 a week — [barely enough to pay for his medical expenses](#)." MEP says they are working with their insurance company to make sure all wounded employees are treated quickly and properly.

Meanwhile, the company is gearing up for the Army's next translation contract. A formal request for proposals is expected to be released by the end of the summer.

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