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Controversy Follows U.S. Bible Translators

By Jim Castelli

Washington Star Religion Editor

Take an American organization that preaches Christianity. Give it some U.S. government money to work with, close ties to governments of the Third World nations where it serves, its own air and radio service, a \$31 million a-year budget and 4,000 workers in 36 countries. Let it bring literacy — and a healthy dose of western culture — to remote Indian tribes. What do you get?

You get the Wycliffe Bible Translators and its two affiliates, the Summer Institute of Linguistics and the Jungle Air and Radio Service.

But some people, asking the same questions, come up with a different answer — the American CIA.

The charge that Wycliffe is a CIA front has been made — and strongly denied — before, but never as dramatically as in Columbia, where a band of guerillas kidnapped a Wycliffe worker, 23-year-old Chester A. Bitterman III, on Jan. 19 and threatened to kill him if his organization did not leave the country by Feb. 19.

The guerillas, who have since extended the deadline, said the institute was a mask of the CIA to establish a military espionage operation, as well as the search and exploitation of our natural resources.

Bitterman and his wife began work in Columbia in 1979. Their two small daughters live there with them.

Wycliffe is relying on government efforts to win Bitterman's release, but it will not leave Columbia, where it has operated for 19 years, according to spokeswoman Betty Blair.

"We don't want to leave the people we're trying to serve," she said. "And to yield here would jeopardize other people in all our other countries and people in other organizations. We also feel we need to be faithful to the Lord in this and not run scared."

Wycliffe, a nondenominational, nonecclesiastical evangelical organization, is based in Huntington Beach, Calif. It was named after John Wycliffe, a 14th Century English Bible translator. The organization was founded in 1934 by W. Cameron Townsend, who, at 84, still runs it.

Townsend had traveled to Central America as a college student in 1917 and found that many small tribes spoke languages other than their nation's official language. He then spent 12 years reducing the spoken language of the Cakchiquil Tribe of Guatemala to a written language, finally producing a New Testament translation.

Townsend was committed to the biblical notion that Christ called for every person on Earth to hear the Gospel and founded Wycliffe to translate the Bible into even the most obscure language.

The organization has now catalogued 5,103 languages, some of them spoken by fewer than 100 people. It has produced Bibles in 800 languages and is working on 650 more translations. Wycliffe has produced the first written form of many of those languages.

"We're alphabet-makers," said Blair, who said most of the people Wycliffe serves are "isolated geographically" and culturally from the rest of their country.

A typical team from the Summer Institute of Linguistics, which does the actual field work, is a married couple or two single women who live with an "indigenous language group" (some object to the label "tribe") for the 15-20 years it takes to complete its work, Blair said.

She said the team produces primers and other educational materials, a dictionary — sometimes, if the people want it, providing a bridge to the national language — and a New Testament translation.

Last year, the Institute won the International Reading Association Award presented by UNESCO for its work in Papua New Guinea. The institute has begun a major literacy project in the Sudan, with a \$1.4 million grant from the U.S. Agency for International Development, providing 27 percent of the cost.

Wycliffe's critics — including a national association of anthropologists from Mexico, some Indian tribes and some nonevangelical missionaries — accuse the organization of "cultural imperialism," undermining the basic cultures of the groups they help. "They have a very 'gringo' image," said one Catholic missionary.

Blair counters that putting an unwritten language on paper "preserves a culture."

Cultures change all the time, she said, and remote tribal cultures are changed by their contact with the outside world. Wycliffe's work helps them cope with that contact and change, she said.

She said Wycliffe does not proselytize, but simply presents the New Testament and offers people a choice. Wade Coggins, director of the 83-member Evangelical Foreign Mission Association, says his group's members regard Wycliffe highly.

Ruthann Geib, who runs the Summer Institute for Linguistics' liaison office in Washington, said in an interview that the institute has been asked to leave Mexico, Peru and Panama because of criticism, but that all three governments had later invited it back in for new projects after the institute beefed up its government relations efforts.