



## SECURITY CONTRACTORS CRITICIZED FOR VIOLENCE IN IRAQ

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*The American private security firm Blackwater is under scrutiny after its contractors shot and killed 17 Iraqi civilians in September, causing outrage from the Iraqi government and questions from the U.S. Congress.*

Contractors have been used to provide extra security in war zones, in part because the U.S. military is stretched thin as fighting continues in Iraq and Afghanistan and fewer young people volunteer to enlist.

These hired forces are paid for by the U.S. government, but are not bound by military law, raising concerns that they are not accountable for their actions and are too quick to use force.

### **A deadly day**

On the morning of September 16, 2007, a group of U.S. officials was being escorted through the streets of Baghdad by a squad of Blackwater security workers.

The exact details of what happened next are still being debated, but what is known is that security workers eventually fired on a crowd of Iraqi citizens in the street.

Iraqi police running to assist a wounded couple sparked suspicion of a car bomb, triggering more gunfire from the American contractors. In total there were 17 Iraqi fatalities, including a young boy.

Iraqi reports maintain that the American guards were unprovoked. Blackwater, meanwhile, insists that they were not the first to fire.

The event sparked investigations in Baghdad and Washington, D.C.

### **Blackwater's role**

Blackwater has received \$1 billion in federal contracts, mostly from the U.S. State Department.

One of the company's chief responsibilities is to protect American diplomats visiting Iraq. For this service, Blackwater bills the U.S. government more than \$1,000 per day for each security detail.

Blackwater landed its first high profile contract in 2003, guarding L.Paul Bremer, who had been appointed by President Bush to oversee the reconstruction of Iraq in the months after the initial U.S.-led invasion.

Before leaving Iraq in 2004, Bremer authorized "Order 17" granting all American personnel immunity from Iraqi law. The order was intended to protect foreign forces, including the military and security contractors, trying to stabilize the country after the United States handed control over to the new Iraqi government.

### **Past evidence of excessive force**

Critics of private security contractors suggest the cost of providing security in Iraq would be more effectively managed by the U.S. military.

Although Blackwater employees operate under extremely dangerous conditions, a string of violent incidents has put their entire operation under question.

Blackwater personnel have been involved in 195 shooting incidents since 2005 according to a report from the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee.

In more than 80 percent of those cases, Blackwater guards fired first even though their contract with the State Department calls them to use defensive force only, according to the report.

### **Iraqi government seeks compensation**

The September incident angered the Iraqi government, which asked the United States to end all contracts with Blackwater in the country within the next six months.

Iraqi authorities also are demanding Blackwater pay \$8 million to family members of each of the victims in compensation.

### **U.S. government imposes new rules**

Democrats in Congress have called for new rules to govern companies who work in Iraq.

Rep. Henry Waxman, D- Calif., chairman of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, said contractors have already undermined the U.S. mission.

When Iraqis are killed, he said on the NewsHour, "their family members don't say, 'Oh, that's a private military as opposed to the U.S. military.' They say, 'Those are the Americans.'"

In the meantime, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice ordered video cameras be mounted in Blackwater vehicles and federal agents to ride with contractors who escort diplomatic convoys.

*-- Compiled by Steve Goldbloom for NewsHour Extra*

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