

Cheney's Private Army in Iraq

by Edward Spannaus

The killing of four security personnel working for Blackwater USA, in Falluja, Iraq on March 31, has put a spotlight on a crucial aspect of the Iraq war and occupation which has been kept largely in the shadows: This is the role of private security contractors, who had been operating largely out of sight in Iraq, as well as in many other countries around the world.

There are at least 15,000 such private security personnel now in Iraq; some estimates run as high as 25,000. Compare this to the current troop level of 134,000, which had been projected to fall—before the recent escalation of the insurgency—to 105,000, when the current troop rotation was completed by late this Spring.

The growth of private contractors is a product of the outsourcing schemes developed for the Department of Defense by Halliburton Corp., when Dick Cheney was Secretary of Defense in the early 1990s. Halliburton had two contracts from Cheney's Defense Department, to study the feasibility of contracting out functions previously performed by the military.

Under Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, the scale of this private contracting, or outsourcing, has grown enormously, and will continue. Outsourcing's financial benefits are questionable; no one has actually demonstrated that outsourcing saves the government money in the long run. Some of its costs are readily apparent; e.g., experienced Special Forces operatives, in whom the military has invested a great deal, are being hired away by private companies who pay them three times as much as the military, while depending significantly on the military's budgets for their contracts. This clearly puts a greater burden on the military to recruit and train more special operators, who can then also be hired away in turn by privateers.

The greatest benefit appears to be political. Having 10% or more of the military's forces being privatized puts less pressure on enlisted units, which are stretched to the gills at the moment. And, more significantly, private contractors don't show up in official casualty rates. Except for a high-profile incident such as that in Fallujah, there is generally no big concern if private contractors are killed in a combat zone—after all, "they were there for the money."

A Legal Grey Zone

A spokesman for the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) told *EIR* that it does not disclose the number of contrac-

tors or their location, for security reasons. However, the State Department maintains a listing of 22 private security companies operating in Iraq, with the names of their contact persons in Iraq. This list includes many of the best-known companies; most are British, including Control Risks; some are South African, such as Erinyes. Only seven of the 22 are listed with American forces' headquarters, and the overall list is clearly incomplete: it does not include Blackwater.

The fact is, that probably no one even knows how many individuals are operating in Iraq on behalf of private security companies. The most regulated are companies working directly for the CPA. According to the CPA, the conduct of these contractors is governed by military-approved "Rules for the Use of Force" which are equivalent to military Rules of Engagement.

These private "security guards" are obviously something more than the security guards at your local shopping mall. They are defending military installations and personnel, and private facilities such as oil wells, in a combat zone. Generally, they are required by their contracts to carry arms and to defend their protectee in the face of hostilities.

Officially, they do not engage in offensive combat operations, and technically they are not mercenaries under international law; yet in reality, they regularly engage in combat, shooting and killing Iraqis, the same as do regular military forces. In short, they often do everything that regular military troops do, but without being subject to military discipline or military law—or being covered by the Geneva Conventions.

For example, on April 4 in Najaf, eight private Blackwater commandos engaged in a fierce firefight with hundreds of Iraqi militias, defending the U.S. Headquarters in that city. Blackwater sent in its own helicopters to resupply its operatives and to ferry out a wounded Marine, according to an account published in the *Washington Post*, which reported that private security contractors "are exchanging fire with Iraqis every day."

World's Largest Private Army

In a follow-up story, the *Post* reported that private security companies are banding together to share intelligence and to call on each other for help when they are under attack, since they cannot always count on the military to rescue them. The *Post* said that this may constitute "the largest private army in the world."

But in some cases, the military cannot help but pay the price for what may be reckless behavior by private contractors. The four Blackwater civilians who were killed in Fallujah, were travelling in that highly-insecure area under conditions that are not permitted for military or CIA personnel: in unarmored SUV's, lightly-armed, and with no backup. They were probably assumed to be intelligence agents.

In the retaliatory operations now being conducted in the Fallujah area, it is probable that 20 Marines have been killed and many more wounded.