

Latin American mercenaries guarding Baghdad's Green Zone

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Wilder Gutierrez Rubio, 38, died a few hours after arriving in Lima, Peru on December 6. Days before, he had been diagnosed with severe leukemia at Ibn Sina Hospital in Baghdad and immediately flown back to his home country.

Gutierrez was part of a 200-man Peruvian contingent sent to Iraq in early October to provide security for Baghdad's Green Zone, home to the US and British embassies, the US Central Command and Iraqi government ministries.

It is widely suspected in Peru that Gutierrez's leukemia was the result of exposure to high levels of uranium in Iraq.

Weeks before, another Peruvian, Martin Jara Hichard, 40, was killed in Kabul, Afghanistan. To this day it remains unclear how he died. Like Gutierrez, he had signed on with a US recruiting firm to guard US installations.

Gutierrez and Jara are two of more than 1,000 Latin Americans recruited by US private security contractors to work as mercenaries performing dangerous jobs in the countries under US military occupation. Their deaths underscore the emergence of a cheap labor market for mercenaries that has thrived in recent months.

Since the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, about 20,000 mercenaries have been hired to work as private security contractors. This figure represents one mercenary for every seven uniformed American soldiers in these regions. With \$30 billion spent by the US Government on private security contractors in 2004—its largest expenditure in Iraq after oil and construction—the contractors have found a gold mine in the Latin American market.

War is big money and, like any other business today, security contractors are scouring the globe looking for the cheapest labor so as to maximize their war profiteering.

Unemployed young men from Peru—most of them former soldiers—are paid only \$1,000 a month—less than a tenth the salary paid to American mercenaries. For \$5.75 an hour—a figure that is roughly equivalent to the US minimum wage—the recruits put themselves “in the line of fire” protecting US and British interests in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Forbes magazine reports that the US Government “pays private firms between \$500 and \$1,500 a day for the experienced military personnel they supply in Iraq. That works out to mercenaries who often earn between \$150,000 and \$250,000 a year.”

Not so for the vast majority of mercenaries recruited from Latin America. And while US mercenaries are rotated in and out of Iraq on 90-day tours, the Latin Americans are committed to remaining in the country for a year, without any relief.

Gutierrez and Jara would qualify as “experienced military personnel,” having served in the Peruvian Air Force and Army respectively. In addition, Gutierrez had received special jungle survival training.

Other Latin American mercenaries have been recruited in Chile, Colombia, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua. Like Peru, all of these countries were the scenes of “dirty wars” carried out by US-backed forces

against their own people. It is significant that training in militaries that produced death squads, “disappearances,” massacres and torture is viewed as essential preparation for aiding Washington's “democratizing” mission in Iraq.

Martin Jara Hichard, the Peruvian mercenary who died in Kabul, signed a contract with the US firm MVM Inc. Peruvians are recruited for Afghanistan by 3D Global Solutions, another American firm. Wackenhut del Peru represents 3D Global Solutions in Peru and is responsible for the security of the US Embassy in Lima.

Virginia-based MVM Inc. is one of the firms reaping the greatest profits from US imperialist aggression. It is dedicated to recruiting and training, and identifying personnel who have specialized training in security. Since its founding in 1979 by three former members of the US Secret Service, MVM has built a strong business partnership with the US government. Its largest client is the US State Department, which has contracted the firm to provide security for 80 American embassies. In 2003 it was awarded a \$100 million contract by the US Department of Health and Human Services to guard American hospitals. MVM was responsible for the protection of American officials in Haiti during the overthrow of the democratically elected president, Jean Bertrand Aristide.

Besides protecting US facilities in Baghdad, the firm's lucrative business in Iraq includes training the Iraqi police. As a result of US wars and occupations, MVM has seen its revenues multiply more than six-fold, from \$30 million in 1997 to \$190 million in 2004.

Wilder Gutierrez Rubio was hired in October by the private security contractor Triple Canopy Operations, a firm established by three former members of the US Army's elite Delta Force. It is represented in Peru by Defion International SAC, which is responsible for hiring mercenaries for Iraq.

Peruvian authorities have accused Triple Canopy, 3D Global Solutions and MVM of compelling those they hire to sign contracts that lack normal legal protections required by the country's labor laws. The Peruvian press reported, for example, that the Triple Canopy contract “exempts the government of the United States, the hiring company and its subsidiaries from all responsibility for each of the claims, losses, damages and injuries that may occur” to the signatory. The contracts run for one year and are renewable.

While the Latin American mercenaries hired by these firms receive some of their military training upon arrival in Iraq or Afghanistan, the contractors have quickly moved to take “cost-saving” measures by covertly contracting the services of the Peruvian Army and setting up a clandestine training camp in Honduras. In his article “For a Fistful of Dollars,” *progresosemanal.com* correspondent Emilio Paz wrote:

“The Peruvian newspaper *El Comercio* in late October revealed that the Peruvian Army was actively involved in furnishing trained mercenaries to the United States. A contract between the Army and Triple Canopy, signed September 23, stated that the Army would set up four training courses at its base in Huachipa, the newspaper said.

“The first course trained 218 ‘civilian volunteers,’ for which the Army was paid 104,640 soles by Triple Canopy—the equivalent of US\$30,657; the second trained another 218, but the Army charged more: 156,960 soles, or US\$45,985. The third course trained 120 men for 86,400 soles, or US\$25,313, and the fourth, 122 men for 87,840 soles, or US\$25,734. The total number of mercenaries trained was 678.

“When questioned about this by [the Peruvian] Congress, Defense Minister Marciano Rengifo acknowledged that the Peruvian Army had agreed to train the ‘civilians’ for a total payment of 435,840 soles, or US\$127,690.”

The Peruvian training camp is not the only one. In September, the Honduran Government ordered the expulsion of 105 Chilean mercenaries, who had entered the country as tourists or businessmen. Hired by the recruiting firm Your Solutions—another Triple Canopy subsidiary—the Chileans were attending a training camp led by US and Chilean personnel in Lepaterique, 16 miles northwest of the capital of Tegucigalpa.

The facilities being used, apparently without the knowledge of the Honduran government, were set up by the US Central Intelligence Agency in the 1980s. There, a combination of CIA personnel and members of Argentina’s military intelligence trained both the “contra” mercenaries attacking Nicaragua and Honduran security forces. They were taught the methods of torture, “disappearance” and political repression developed under the Argentine dictatorship. Lepaterique became the headquarters of the infamous Battalion 316, which unleashed a wave of political killings, torture and imprisonment against opponents of the US-backed government of Honduras.

Oscar Aspe, a former officer of the Chilean army, recently told the Honduran newspaper *La Tribuna* that he and the other mercenaries were being trained to “guard dignitaries, buildings, ports and other facilities,” including embassies. Aspe added, “We are fulfilling a mission for the US government,” identifying the Bush administration as his client.

The Honduran newspaper reported that in just one day in November, Your Solutions shipped 108 Hondurans, 88 Chileans and 16 Nicaraguans to Iraq. It is estimated that there are about 700 Peruvians, 250 Chileans and 320 Hondurans working in Baghdad’s Green Zone. *La Tribuna* also confirmed that the monthly pay was \$1,000, with an additional \$500 for English-speaking men.

While private security contractors describe the job as a non-combatant position, dismissing the term “mercenaries,” this is contradicted by the heavy military training with “combat” weapons that use 5.56 millimeter and 9 millimeter ammunition. A recruit in the Honduras camp told the AFP news agency that the instructor “explained to us that where we were going everyone would be our enemy, and we’d have to look at them that way, because they would want to kill us and the gringos too... So we’d have to be heartless when it was up to us to kill someone, even it was a child.”

Foreign mercenaries face the same dangers as US military personnel in Iraq and are essentially being recruited as cheaper—and less politically sensitive—cannon fodder. According to CNN.com, in 2004 “the attacks that used to target the military are now directed at civilian contractors and their private security forces... At one point there were about 150 attacks per day.” The Iraq Coalition Casualties web site, icasualties.org, has posted a “partial list” of 293 contractor fatalities as of December 27, a figure that is proportionate to the casualty rate for US soldiers deployed in Iraq.

Another indication that those taking these “security” jobs face the risks of occupation troops is the dismemberment insurance offered to the mercenaries. According to a Triple Canopy contract obtained by a Lima TV station, the insurance payments are \$243,000 for the loss of an arm; \$225,000 for a leg; \$190,000 for a hand; \$160,000 for a foot; \$125,000 for an eye; \$58,000 for a finger, and \$12,500 for a toe. The amount for loss of life was not reported.

Most of the Latin American mercenaries had served in their countries’ armed forces and found themselves unemployed after leaving the military.

Wilder Gutierrez left his low-paying job as a supermarket supervisor. He signed up for Iraq in an attempt to save money for his wife and young daughter. Gutierrez lived in Marcavilca, a shanty town (pueblo joven) located in the old working class district of Chorrillos in Lima. His friends remember him as a healthy man who was the best goal scorer on the neighborhood soccer team. “He never got tired, we would have noticed if he was sick,” said a friend. From Iraq, “Wilfred talked to his family every week and never complained of any illness,” said a niece.

Gutierrez’s widow, Maria Gutierrez Amaya, told CPN radio in Lima, Peru that her husband was not the only case of leukemia in Baghdad due to high levels of uranium in Iraq.

Mrs. Gutierrez also complained that communications were supervised. “They are instructed to ask questions about how things are going in Peru, and when we ask about their situation, the call is cut off,” she said.

Triple Canopy’s legal advisor showed a copy of the health certificate issued by the Municipal Director of Health of the city of Lima that said that at the time of his departure to Iraq on October 11, Gutierrez showed “no signs of disease.” When he arrived in Lima on December 5, he had lost seven kilos, his body showed bruises and his hemoglobin level was 5.7. At his departure he had a level of 12.8. Wilfred Gutierrez died shortly after midnight December 6 of an internal hemorrhage.

Aside from the fate of those Latin American being shipped off to Iraq as mercenaries, the implications within the region itself are ominous. In both Peru and Honduras, the recruitment and training of these elements involves secret deals between the private contractors and the military—undoubtedly with the participation of the CIA—apparently conducted behind the backs of the elected governments of both countries. Similar arrangements were worked out in Chile, where the contractors were allowed to recruit from active-duty Chilean military personnel.

To service the illegal US war and occupation of Iraq—and feed the profit drive of the contracting firms—political relations and networks are being cultivated that threaten to revive and strengthen the same forces that produced the string of military coups and dictatorships that swept through the continent three decades ago.



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