

Fiji's economic conscripts: tragic victims of the war in Iraq

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The death of three Fijian security guards in Iraq on June 9 brought the Fijian death toll to 11 over three months and highlighted the little known involvement of more than 3,000 Fijian nationals as soldiers and contractors in the US-led occupation. The tragic deaths have had a terrible impact on the tiny island state of 893,000 people. The Fijians are economic conscripts sucked into the Middle East war through their desperation to escape poverty and unemployment at home.

The three latest casualties—Vilisoni Gauna, Penaia Kanatabatu Vakaotia, and Mikaele Banidawa, along with Australian Wayne Schulz—were killed by a road-side bomb 300 kilometres north of Baghdad while escorting a convoy from Basra in the south to northern Iraq. They were contractors for the British security firm ArmorGroup Ltd, which supplies soldiers, security guards, drivers and labourers for the war-torn region.

Gauna had previously worked as a security guard for the US-based Bechtel Corporation's power plant in Iraq earning \$US1,500 per week. This represented a small fortune in Fijian terms and was equivalent to the salary of a cabinet minister. With Fiji's poverty line at \$US172 per month, the war represented a way out of social misery, despite the obvious risks.

Among other recent casualties, Anasa Navukaro, Kelemedi Dreuvakabalawa, Malakai Sekibureta and Iosefa Cagi died on April 18, when a rocket-propelled grenade hit their vehicle in Kirkuk. On April 30, Josaia Taka Seniyasi, Sevuloni Nawaduadua and Alifereti Cereilagi were killed by a roadside bomb when they were escorting a convoy of trucks carrying reconstruction materials 50 km southeast of Baghdad. On May 2, Viliame Ravatugaga died in a bomb blast north of Baghdad.

Security firms have flocked to Fiji to set up local agencies. The level of desperation in Fiji is so high that, according to *Fijilive.com*, in May 2005 up to 15,000 people may have paid a registration fee of \$US86 to security firm Meridian. The *Islands Business* magazine of April 2005 reported that villagers used development funds to pay application fees for

their men.

The firms are attracted by the ready supply of highly trained men, mostly former Fijian soldiers. Many have had previous experience in the Middle East as part of UN missions in Lebanon and Sinai. Some have also served in Cyprus, Namibia, Kosovo, Zimbabwe, Bougainville or Timor. On their return to Fiji, these soldiers faced a very uncertain economic future unless they signed up for work in Iraq.

Saula Tuikoro of Sabre International told *Fijilive.com* that after serving in Lebanon “they (the soldiers) were demobilised and what eventually happened was that overnight we had a glut of highly-skilled, highly-trained soldiers doing nothing, despite being skilled in military duties. Members of one reserve battalion were given security duties ... (guarding) supermarkets, but at the end of the day the soldiers realised that what they were being paid was not enough compared to what payment they could demand using their skills. Many of them opted to join security companies, securing work contracts in Iraq and Kuwait.”

The first security company in Fiji, the British firm Global Risks Strategies, arrived soon after the Iraq war started in 2003 with the intention of recruiting over 500 personnel. Head of Global Risk Strategies' Fiji operations, Lieutenant Colonel Sakiusa Raivoce, said desperation for employment and better pay were the main reasons that thousands of Fijians were risking the dangers of “kidnapping, roadside bombing, shoot-outs and cold-blooded murder”.

In January 2005, Homeland Security Limited set up, recruiting 181 Fijians by mid-2005. Homeland is an agency for ArmorGroup, which runs offices in Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra and claims to provide “major corporate and government clients in Iraq with risk assessment and management, close protection, manned guarding, technical security systems, and mine action services”.

Sabre International Security Fiji Ltd, a subsidiary of British Control Solutions, arrived in March 2005 and initially recruited 50 men for a six-month period. Another 70 men or more are working in Iraq with Triple Canopy, a US

corporation.

By all accounts, recruitment is rising as the situation in Iraq deteriorates and the occupation becomes increasingly dependent on hired mercenaries. Meridian Security Services recruiting officer Timoci Lolohea told the *Pacific Magazine* in May that the demand for Fijian soldiers is so great that he intends to recruit up to 2,000 men.

According to the *Pacific Magazine*, many of the contractors are based in Kuwait and earn salaries of between \$US2,100 and \$US3,500 per month. Every time men crossed the border into Iraq they earned a risk allowance ranging from \$US550 to \$US880.

It is the British army, however, that is the largest recruiter of Fijian troops for service in Iraq. About 2,000 Fijians have enlisted, making up about one quarter of the British force in Iraq. Fiji is a former British colony and in 2004, the British defence ministry sent teams to Fiji to do initial fitness and aptitude tests for possible recruits.

Many of these men have been placed in the most deadly postings. Lance Corporal Tom Ah Sing, based in Amarah, south of Baghdad beside the Tigris River, told the *Fiji Times* in June: “There was bombing every day ... Al Amarah is actually the most dangerous area compared to most places. For instance, in Basra you’d have only one mortar a week fired at the place but in Al Amarah when we were there, it would be about an average of three every night and on one night there were even 14 mortars shot at us.”

Fiji is not officially part of Washington’s Coalition of the Willing but has sent 224 troops in two guards units, as part of the United Nations Assistance Mission guarding UN facilities. The Fijian government supports the Iraq war and has encouraged the recruiting firms to proliferate. In January 2005, Labour Minister Kenneth Zinck gave them the green light: “The government knows that more men are leaving for Kuwait and Iraq and it is a good thing, because it is providing employment for the unemployed. This is one solution to the increasing unemployment rate in the country today.”

The government has dismissed the mounting death toll, declaring that it was a matter of individual responsibility and that its role was only to ensure the recruits were insured. Chief executive in the Prime Minister’s Office, Joji Kotobalavu, told the *Pacific Magazine* in May: “We all know about the war in Iraq and risks associated with the job so it’s an individual’s choice ... the government cannot stop anyone because they are exercising their constitutional right and freedom to travel and work anywhere.”

Although recruits are told their families will be handsomely compensated in the event of injury or death, in many cases the promised amounts never eventuate. The *Fiji Sun* editorial on June 10 commented: “Families of dead

guards can be and have been left with little or nothing in the way of compensation for the simple reason that their employers cannot be traced.”

Apart from its diplomatic interests in aligning with Washington and its close regional partner Australia, the Fijian government turns a blind eye to the rapacity of the recruiters because of its own desperation for income. Two of the country’s major export industries—sugar and garments—are on the verge of collapse. Global Risk Strategies’ representative Raivoce estimated that in the past 15 months about \$US8.8 million has come into the country from Fijians in Iraq.

Fiji’s Reserve Bank governor, Savenaca Narube, calculated that money sent home by Fijians serving abroad soared to \$US170 million in 2004 from \$US28 million five years earlier. Total remittances to the country increased from around \$US34 million from 1999 to \$US287 million, making them Fiji’s largest revenue earner, surpassing tourism at \$US229 million. According to the UN Economic and Social survey for 2006: “This boom in remittances is helping to sustain the economy in the face of the sharp decline in garment exports and the long-term decline in sugar production and exports.”

Despite all the claims in Washington, London and Canberra about the “progress” being made by their forces in Iraq, their growing reliance on mercenary contractors is a measure of the lack of popular support for the occupation, both among the Iraqi people and at home. According to recent estimates, there may be between 25,000 and 35,000 private military personnel in Iraq. After the US army, it is by far the largest force in the country. Heavily-armed security guards, speeding through the streets in darkened vehicles, opening fire on people without warning, manning checkpoints or mobilised outside buildings with automatic weapons, have become another hated symbol of the US presence.

However, employment and poverty in Fiji, along with government encouragement, are ensuring a steady stream of new recruits for the various agencies eager to exploit a lucrative export commodity—desperate former soldiers who see no way out except to put their own lives on the line in Iraq.



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