

Blackwater mercenaries' record of murder in Iraq

Kate Randall
1 October 2007

In the aftermath of the bloody shooting incident in Baghdad on September 16 involving hired guards of Blackwater USA, more information is coming to light about the operations of this and similar mercenary outfits in Iraq.

The Iraqi Interior Ministry contends that as many as 20 Iraqis were killed and several dozens wounded in the massacre, and that the security contractors' actions were unprovoked. To date, Blackwater has released no account of the incident, and has maintained that its guards fired in self-defense.

New details of the September 16 shootings and other violent incidents involving Blackwater demonstrate that the security firm has operated with impunity in Baghdad and other areas of Iraq, firing on unarmed civilians without provocation. US State Department reports, which likely underestimate violent incidents involving Blackwater, show that since the beginning of the year Blackwater guards have been deployed on 1,873 missions and have discharged weapons in the course of 56 of these.

Despite widespread outrage in the civilian population over the episode, and calls by the Iraqi government for the security firm to leave the country, armed Blackwater convoys continue to patrol through Baghdad, escorting American diplomats.

According to information provided to the *New York Times* by an American official who was briefed on a US investigation into the September 16 shooting, during the incident at least one guard continued to fire on civilians while others called on him to stop. At least one guard reportedly drew a weapon on another who would not stop shooting. A Blackwater spokesperson would not confirm any of these details.

The episode began at around 11:50 a.m., when diplomats with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) were meeting about a mile northwest of Nisour Square in a guarded compound.

A bomb exploded a few hundred yards from where the USAID diplomats were meeting. Instead of waiting 15-30 minutes for things to calm down, the customary practice, the Blackwater convoys began carrying the diplomats south, toward the Green Zone, which would take them through Nisour Square.

At least four sport utility vehicles operated by Blackwater stopped in lines of traffic that were entering the square from the south and west, and some armed guards exited their vehicles and took up positions.

At 12:08 p.m., at least one guard shot at the driver of a car approaching the square, killing the driver, who has not been identified. More shots were fired, killing a woman in the passenger seat—Mahisin Muhsin, a doctor—and the baby she was holding. A grenade or flare was then fired into the car, setting it on fire.

Traffic officer Ali Khalaf, who was on the scene, told Agence France-Presse that the Americans continued to shoot: "The Americans fired at everything that moved, with a machine gun and even with a grenade launcher. There was panic. Everyone tried to flee. Vehicles tried to make U-turns to escape. There were dead bodies and wounded people everywhere. The road was full of blood. A bus was also hit and several of

its occupants were wounded."

He added that two small black helicopters hovering overhead swept down and sprayed the scene with machine-gun fire.

One of those killed was Ghania Hussein, a mother of eight, who was riding in a bus towards the square with her daughter Afrah Sattar. As the Blackwater guards turned toward the bus, Sattar cried out, "They're going to shoot at us, Mama." Moments later a bullet pierced her mother's skull and she was dead.

"They are killers," Sattar said of the Blackwater guards. "I swear to God, not one bullet was shot at them. Why did they shoot us? My mother didn't carry a weapon."

In the wake of the September 16 massacre, numerous US investigations into the incident as well as the activities of Blackwater and other security firms have been launched. While these investigations are an effort at damage control, they also reflect tensions over the operations of the hired mercenaries—both between the US military and the State Department, and between the Bush administration and the puppet Iraqi regime.

A joint American-Iraqi inquiry was set up by the American Embassy and the Iraqi Ministry of Defense following the shootings, comprised of five State Department officials, three US military officials and eight Iraqis. While Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had originally said Blackwater should immediately leave Iraq, he backed down and agreed to await the inquiry's findings. As of last Saturday, the commission had yet to meet and had not responded to Iraqi government requests for information.

Last Friday, the US State Department announced it was sending a team to Iraq to evaluate security measures used to guard US diplomats. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, however, has not taken action to change any policies in regard to the 842 Blackwater guards working for the department. The State Department continues to defend the security firm, saying the guards were ambushed in Nisour Square and reacted appropriately.

Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte claimed the State Department exercised "close in-country supervision" of Blackwater. "I personally was grateful for the presence of my Blackwater security detail, largely comprised of ex-Special Forces and other military, when I served as ambassador to Iraq," he said.

The State Department is under pressure from the Iraqi government to investigate seven incidents involving Blackwater since the beginning of the year, and department officials say their review will consider five of them.

The Iraqi government has threatened to try the Blackwater guards under Iraqi law and is considering legislation that would bring the supervision of private contractors under its control. This is unlikely as, under provisions put in place by the US following the 2003 invasion, US military and foreign contractors are immune from prosecution under Iraqi law.

One of the incidents the Maliki government wants investigated took place September 9, a week before the latest Blackwater shootings. Batoul

Mohammed Ali Hussein, a clerk in the Iraqi customs office in Diyala province, had come to Baghdad for the day in connection with paperwork at the central office near the fortified Green Zone.

According to an account in the *Seattle Times*, as she walked out of the customs building a US Embassy convoy under Blackwater protection was passing through. When the guards ordered construction workers to move back, the workers responded by throwing rocks. Witnesses said the guards then sprayed the intersection with bullets.

“Hussein, on the opposite side of the street from the construction site, fell to the ground, shot in the leg. As she struggled to her feet and took a step, eyewitnesses said, a Blackwater security guard shot her multiple times. She died on the spot,” the *Seattle Times* reported. “Before the shooting stopped, four other people were killed in the beginning of eight days of violence.”

Three days later, Blackwater guards were back in Al-Khilani Square terrorizing Baghdad residents and hurling frozen bottles of water into windshields and store windows.

Another incident involved a shooting last Christmas eve of an Iraqi guard for the Iraqi vice president by a drunken Blackwater contractor, who was whisked out of the country after the killing, infuriating the Iraqi government. While this killing is being investigated by the US Justice Department, it is unclear what laws will be applied as the crime occurred overseas.

As Iraqi anger mounts to the bloody death toll and unprovoked violence by security contractors, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates has sent a five-man team to Iraq to investigate relations between US military forces and these private firms. The actions of these hired mercenaries are focusing new attention on the crimes of the US occupation and on the growing debacle in Iraq.

Last week, Gates’s top deputy sent a three-page directive to senior Pentagon officers ordering them to review rules governing contractors’ use of arms and to reportedly begin legal proceedings against those who have violated military law. In a copy of the directive obtained by the *Los Angeles Times*, Dep. Defense Secretary Gordon R. England wrote, “Commanders have UCMJ [US Uniform Code of Military Justice] authority to disarm, apprehend and detain DoD [Department of Defense] contractors suspected of having committed a felony offense” in violation of the rules for use of force.

This is the same Defense Department, it should be noted, that has refused to prosecute any high-ranking military officers in connection with the multiple atrocities in Iraq that have become public knowledge, from Abu Ghraib, to Haditha, to Mahmudiya, to Fallujah, etc. It is, moreover, well established that the “rules of engagement” promulgated by commanders in Iraq permit, if not encourage, the murder of Iraqi civilians.

In testimony before the Senate Appropriations Committee on the Bush administration’s request for an additional \$189.3 billion to fund the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2008, Gates said, “My concern is whether there has been sufficient accountability and oversight in the region over the activities of these security companies.”

The defense secretary’s comments highlight tensions between the US military and the hired mercenaries of Blackwater USA and other security contractors operating in Iraq: US companies DynCorp International and Triple Canopy, and British-run Aegis Security and Erinys International. An estimated 20,000 to 48,000 armed contractors from at least 25 private security companies are currently operating in Iraq.

As a rule, these contractors earn far more than US military soldiers. Blackwater guards providing security to US Ambassador Ryan Crocker and other diplomats can earn as much as \$1,000 a day, more than ten times the pay of the lowest paid American soldier and more than a four-star general.

Many come from backgrounds in the Navy Seals and the Army’s Delta Force, and flaunt a hunger for blood and violence and open disdain for the

civilian population. They drive at high speeds through Iraqi neighborhoods, leaning out of vehicles with leveled weapons, hurling obscenities at residents.

In a civil court case last month in Virginia against Triple Canopy, two former employees of the contractor testified that their supervisor—formerly from the military—shot randomly into two Iraqi civilian vehicles on the airport road in Baghdad, telling them he wanted to “kill somebody” before leaving for vacation. He denied it.

These mercenaries are part of the privatization of US military operations. When the US invaded Iraq in March 2003, they bought the largest force of private contractors ever deployed in modern warfare. While during the first Gulf War the ratio of troops to private contractors was about 60 to 1, in the current war in Iraq privately employed operatives outnumber US troops, with 180,000 contract personnel involved in both security and other tasks from more than 100 countries, compared to the official US military presence of 160,000 troops.

In the prosecution of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, vast sums of money have been funneled into the pockets of Bush administration cronies and US multinational corporations. While US spending on mercenary and private contracting services is not readily available, some congressional estimates indicate that 40 cents of every dollar spent on the war goes to private contractors. An estimated \$2 billion a week is spent on US operations in Iraq.

Multimillion- and billion-dollar profits are channeled to companies like Haliburton, where Vice President Dick Cheney formerly served as CEO. In the early days of the war, Halliburton subsidiary Kellogg Brown and Root (KBR) was awarded a no-bid contract to extinguish oil well fires in Iraq estimated at tens of millions of dollars. KBR also has thousands of military contractors on the ground in Kuwait and Turkey as part of a government contract worth close to a billion dollars.

Blackwater USA has government contracts totaling at least \$800 million, providing security to US Ambassador Ryan Crocker and other diplomats. Only recently, it was awarded a large State Department contract to provide helicopter services in Iraq.

Cofer Black, former State Department coordinator for counterterrorism and former head of the CIA’s counterterrorism center, is Blackwater vice-chairman. Former CIA divisional head Robert Richer joined the company as vice president of intelligence in 2005.

The North Carolina-based company has trained more than 20,000 mercenaries ready to be deployed in wars around the world. Blackwater has also hired at least 60 Chilean commandos trained under the Pinochet dictatorship.

Under conditions of growing opposition to the war in Iraq, the Bush administration has assembled a de facto shadow army of shock troops that can be used to wage this and other unpopular military ventures in the global “war on terror.” These mercenaries are not accountable to Congress, the US military or international laws governing war and war crimes.

The recent spate of violent killings carried out by the Blackwater mercenaries in Iraq must serve as a warning of the threat posed by a ruling elite that subordinates the interests of the vast majority of the population to its profits and imperialist adventures. These fascistic mercenary elements are being groomed to be thrown against workers and youth in the US who resist the escalating attacks on their living standards and democratic rights.



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