

German magazine reports

Blackwater mercenaries used for CIA renditions

Patrick Martin
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The German news magazine *Der Spiegel* announced Saturday that it has obtained evidence that the security firm formerly known as Blackwater Associates was hired by the CIA to transport prisoners from Guantánamo Bay to secret prisons in Central Asia where they could be tortured.

US press reports late last week revealed that Blackwater had CIA contracts to carry out “targeted killings”—assassinations—and to load and service the missiles used by CIA officers to conduct assassination strikes against targets in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The report in *Der Spiegel* adds to the litany of crimes committed by Blackwater, which was renamed Xe after five of its operatives were charged with mass murder in the slaughter of 17 Iraqi civilians on September 17, 2007 in a Baghdad square.

The *Der Spiegel* report is based on a memo from two former Blackwater employees that describes the relations between the company and the CIA. The full article is to be published in the magazine’s Monday edition, but a summary posted on the magazine’s web site includes the following details:

- The CIA hired Blackwater to conduct extraordinary renditions (kidnappings illegal under international law)
- Blackwater flew the rendition targets from the United States and Guantánamo, Cuba to Kandahar, Afghanistan
- Blackwater transported prisoners from Guantánamo to interrogations at other secret prison camps in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan is a police-state run by President Islam Karimov.

The memo also names “five participants who were

responsible for building the assassination team, including a member of the Blackwater’s paratrooper team and an employee of Blackwater Security Consulting, who, according to the memo was meant to be used as a ‘hitman’.”

The memo names the man who “set up the teams” of assassins as Alvin Bernard Krongard, executive director of the CIA (the third-ranking position), who shortly thereafter retired to join Blackwater.

A report in the *New York Times* Saturday noted that despite Barack Obama’s claim that he would put an end to such atrocities as the indiscriminate shooting of Iraqi civilians, the State Department has more than \$400 million in contracts with Blackwater to fly personnel around Iraq, guard diplomats in Afghanistan, and conduct training in “antiterrorism tactics” at its North Carolina camp. The Afghanistan contracts run through 2011. Such deals have made the company’s founder Erik Prince, scion of an auto parts mogul, immensely wealthy.

Four top former CIA officials play major roles at Blackwater/Xe: Krongard; former counterterrorism chief Cofer Black; deputy operations director Robert Richer; and Enrique Prado, former senior executive officer in the Directorate of Operations, who has close ties to Jose A. Rodriguez, head of the CIA’s clandestine service. The four officials moved from the government to the contractor, at enormous increases in salary, while continuing to direct key operations for the US intelligence apparatus.

The *Der Spiegel* article comes on the eve of the publication of a CIA inspector general’s report, produced in 2004, into the torture of prisoners at secret CIA prisons around the world. The report has been

suppressed for five years, first by the Bush administration and then by Obama, and is now being released, in heavily censored form, as a consequence of a lawsuit by the American Civil Liberties Union.

Newsweek magazine, in a posting on its website Friday, claimed to have had an advance look at the report, asserting that the report documents at least two clear cases of torture that have not been previously made public: one instance where a gun was used to threaten a prisoner with execution, the other where an electric drill was turned on near the prisoner's body, with the clear implication that it would be used to torture him if he did not cooperate.

Threats of execution are illegal under the Geneva Conventions and US laws, and barred even by the torture memos drafted by Justice Department lawyers under the Bush administration. This last fact is the basis for Attorney General Eric Holder's reported decision to bring criminal charges against a handful of CIA interrogators—presumably including those involved in the drill and gun incidents.

The response in Washington to the latest revelations about the CIA and Blackwater has been a mixture of full-throated defense of all CIA agents, no matter what crimes they may have committed (the Republicans), and an effort to focus blame on a handful of individuals and exonerate the decision makers like Bush, Cheney, Tenet and Rumsfeld (the Democrats and the Obama administration).

The chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Dianne Feinstein, criticized the agency's failure to notify Congress, in accordance with the decision by then vice president Cheney. The California Democrat said that contrary to claims by the CIA and congressional Republicans, the assassination program "had, in fact, gone beyond the simple planning stage" and therefore had to be reported to Congress, by law.

She also attacked the outsourcing of CIA activities to Blackwater, in the following language: "I have believed for a long time that the Intelligence Community is over-reliant on contractors to carry out its work. This is especially a problem when contractors are used to carry out activities that are inherently governmental."

This remarkable statement deserves consideration. Feinstein is speaking of assassination, torture and kidnapping, to which she gives the label "activities that are inherently governmental." The senator perhaps has

said more than she intended.



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