

US employs former child soldiers as mercenaries

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31 October 2012

The US is increasingly using private security forces to wage its wars and maintain its occupation of countries after the withdrawal of regular troops. Both in Iraq and Afghanistan, thousands of mercenaries and dozens of private security companies are being deployed to this end.

The utterly ruthless and cynical methods employed by American companies and endorsed by Washington were graphically illustrated in a German documentary television program broadcast last week. “*Weltspiegel*” showed how US companies were recruiting former child soldiers from Uganda to risk their lives as mercenaries for miserly pay in Iraq and other war zones.

The journalists, Marcel Kolvenbach and Daniel Satra, followed the path of young men from Uganda who were hired by Ugandan private security companies. These companies then pass them on to US firms that are commissioned by the American army to guard their camps in Iraq and other areas of the world where the United States is waging war.

In many cases, the young recruits had fought as child soldiers for the Christian fundamentalist rebel group of Joseph Kony against the Ugandan government led by President Museveni. In the course of fighting they have both experienced and committed horrible massacres.

In March of this year there was widespread media hype in the US surrounding the thirty-minute video “Kony 2012.” The video denounced the plight of Ugandan children who were used as soldiers by Kony. As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned at that time, this campaign was also supported by President Obama campaign in “a cynical attempt to manipulate public opinion in favor of American intervention.”

The reality is that the traumatized child soldiers in Kony’s force are being systematically used by the US as cheap cannon fodder in Iraq. Ugandan security companies and their American partners are quite prepared to exploit the dire and traumatic situation of the child soldiers.

The Ugandan journalist Rosario Achola reported: “Most of these former child soldiers do not know how to make ends meet when the war is over. They cannot find work and find themselves adrift. So a job as a security guard in Iraq or Afghanistan is practically the only choice they have.”

She continued: “It’s ironic that the nations which expressed the most outrage about Kony and child soldiers is now exploiting these former child soldiers to fight their battles and protect them in a war which has nothing to do with Uganda.”

The young men who have learned nothing other than how to kill are required to risk their lives for a few dollars to make profits for local companies operating throughout the country. They are assured they are carrying out a safe job, but once in the field the reality is very different. Many of the returnees report of fatalities or injuries. Many are themselves injured.

On behalf of *Weltspiegel*, Rosario Achola interviewed Ssali Twaha, a mercenary who was told that he would be carrying out a safe mission in Iraq in the Green Zone. But then a ricochet hit his camp. He recalls: “Suddenly I heard my comrade above breathing heavily and blood dripped down on me through the mattress. It was pitch dark, I thought he had wet the bed. I wanted to wake him up. But when I touched him everything was full of blood with foam coming from his mouth.”

A US attorney reports on the case of a seriously injured Ugandan, paralyzed on one side of his body, who was deported back to his home country and then just left to his fate. “When I met him he had neither a disability pension nor medical care. He was just wasting away.” The attorney took the case to court. A further 60 victims then came forward who had suffered the same fate.

The companies that receive large sums from the US government to insure soldiers against such injuries refused to pay out. “Three of our clients have received

death threats—in Uganda and Iraq. They received threatening calls such as: ‘If you do not drop your lawsuit, we will kill you.’ The attorney also reported on another injured soldier who was told by his employer, ‘If you report it you will arrive home in a body bag.’”

One security company that offered the US Army mercenaries for \$1,000 per man per month was undercut by another that demanded just \$400. As a result the soldiers employed by the first company were forced to return home.

The former child soldier Dibya Moses also had to leave Iraq after an illness and return to Uganda. He was dismissed without any compensation or severance pay. In an interview with Achola, he explained: “The people here are desperate for a job in Iraq because they see it as an opportunity to earn an extra few dollars. In the end it is like modern-day slavery.”

Both the US Defense Department and the State Department refused to comment on this practice. The Ugandan security contractors are not allowed to contact the US authorities. “It is a subcontractor agreement. If the US company finds out that Ugandan companies have contacted the US Defense Department or State Department then their contract will be terminated immediately,” declared an employee of a Ugandan security company. Many now fear for their jobs because the US companies are increasingly recruiting in Pakistan.

For US security firms, the hiring and deployment of mercenaries is a billion dollar business with high profit margins. The US government is prepared to pay out huge sums in order to “outsource” death and injury, thereby reducing the number of US military casualties. Journalist Sarah Stillman has established that currently in Afghanistan, more members of private security companies are killed in action than US soldiers.



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