Blackwater mercenaries sentenced for 2007 Iraq massacre

Niles Williamson
14 April 2015

A federal district court judge sentenced four former Blackwater Worldwide mercenaries to lengthy prison terms on Monday for their role in the Nisour Square massacre in Baghdad, Iraq in 2007.

Nicholas Slatten, Evan Liberty, Paul Slough and Devin Heard were convicted on charges of first-degree murder and manslaughter by a federal jury in October 2014. The four were part of a security team working for the US State Department in Iraq.

On September 16, 2007 the members of the convoy, unprovoked, opened fire with their automatic weapons on stopped traffic in Nisour Square and also launched stun grenades. The mercenaries continued to fire their weapons as civilians tried to flee the area. One member of the security team did not stop firing his automatic rifle, despite calls to cease fire, until a fellow mercenary threatened to shoot him. Blackwater mercenaries in helicopters also fired into traffic from overhead.

The massacre resulted in the deaths of 17 unarmed Iraqis and wounded at least 20 others.

Monday's sentencing was the conclusion of a years-long process, which has wound its way through the federal court system. Charges were first brought by the Department of Justice in 2008 and subsequently dismissed by a district judge in 2009 before being reinstated by an appeals court in 2011. The US government rejected Iraqi demands that the Blackwater mercenaries stand trial in Iraq.

Jeremey Ridgeway and Donald Ball, two other Blackwater contractors who were involved in the massacre, were originally charged along with the four others but had their cases resolved previously. Ridgeway struck a deal with prosecutors in 2010 and pled guilty to manslaughter, attempted manslaughter and aiding and abetting. All charges against Ball were dropped in 2013.

The judge sentenced Slatten who was convicted of first-degree murder to life in prison. Liberty, Slough and Heard, convicted of voluntary manslaughter and using a machine gun to carry out a violent crime, were each given the mandatory minimum sentence of 30 years in prison. All four men have filed appeals of their convictions and sentences.

US District Court Judge Royce Lamberth rejected a motion by the defense to reduce the four men's sentences. "Based on the seriousness of the crimes, I find the penalty is not excessive," the judge stated. Lamberth also turned down a motion by the federal prosecutor to impose harsher sentences.

Monday's sentencing hearing was taken up by testimony from family members of the Iraqi victims as well as character witness for the mercenaries. Mohammad Kinani Al-Razzaq testified about the murder of his nine-year-old son, Ali Mohammed Hafedh Abdul Razzaq, demanding that the judge show the former Blackwater employees "what the law is."

"What's the difference between these criminals and terrorists?" Razzaq asked rhetorically.

Assistant US Attorney T. Patrick Martin stated that the lengthy sentences handed out Monday would prevent American contractors from carrying out similar atrocities in the future. "You are entrusted to do a job with deadly weapons, but you must use them only when necessary, and their use must be justified. You can't just shoot first and seek justification later," he said.

The convictions, handed down in October, have been depicted as an example of the US government's commitment to justice and democratic principles. "This verdict is a resounding affirmation of the commitment of the American people to the rule of law, even in times

© World Socialist Web Site

of war," US Attorney Ronald Machen said last year.

While the Blackwater guards are certainly guilty of the wanton murder of innocent Iraqis, the massacre in Baghdad was just one of many notorious atrocities, which flowed out of the logic of the illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq launched in 2003. The perpetrators of these crimes were, among others, President George W. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice.

Other notorious incidents seared in the collective consciousness are the US military's assault on the city of Fallujah in 2004 in which white phosphorous and incendiary bombs were deployed, the torture of inmates at the notorious Abu Ghraib prison facility and the Haditha massacre in which US Marines killed 24 unarmed civilians.

There were an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 so-called security contractors employed by the US at the peak of its occupation of Iraq. Blackwater was just one of a number of private firms that were providing security and military services for the US military and State Department. A report by the Democratic staff of the House Oversight Committee released in 2007 found that Blackwater guards were firing their weapons an average of 1.4 times a week and in 80 percent of cases were the first to open fire.

While the four former Blackwater mercenaries have been sentenced to prison, those who placed them in Nisour Square, Bush et al, remain free from even the threat of prosecution. To date none of those ultimately responsible for the destruction of Iraqi society and the deaths of more than a million Iraqis have been held to account. When it comes to those in positions of power the Obama administration has held to its mantra in relation to other crimes of the US government, including systematic torture carried out by the CIA, "look forward, not back."

Blackwater Worldwide, which has since changed its name to Academi Services, continues to offer its mercenary services to governments around the world. Amidst anti-austerity protests Academi was contracted by the Greek government at the end of 2012 to oversee police services and provide protective services to government members and agencies. German media reported that Academi operators were working alongside the fascist Right Sector militia in Ukraine to suppress pro-Russia separatists opposed to last year's US backed right-wing coup.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site