

San Francisco, CA - Related Documents: GAO Report on Contractors

By August Cole, MarketWatch

As the rising death toll of hired security contractors in Iraq and other hotspots heightens attention, lawmakers are calling for greater disclosure about how these private firms carry out military-type missions.

For Rep. David Price, D-N.C., the grisly killings in Fallujah last year of four contractors from North Carolina-based Blackwater USA helped show the need for oversight and debate about an industry that has rapidly risen to take on frontline work for the United States.

Last month, Price reintroduced the proposed Transparency and Accountability in Security Contracting Act, which would set disclosure guidelines and standards for private security firms. The first version of the bill failed last year during the presidential campaign at a time when the Republicans were especially sensitive to questions about U.S. operations in Iraq.

Price's legislation encompasses companies whose workers carry weapons for their contracts or are involved in security, training and logistics duties. "The bill encompasses anything that would be regarded as a military function," he said.

Divulging details like costs, training, insurance, pay, benefits and other logistics would in most cases be required by the legislation. So would reports of casualties.

In Iraq, private contractors' duties range from bodyguard services for high-ranking officials to police training to interrogation. Security personnel make up a major part of the estimated 20,000 American contractors now working in the country.

Although these are government contracts, critics say it's hard to get a clear picture of how much money is being directed to these firms since much of the work is farmed out to subcontractors.

Private contractors have also been involved in the interrogation of prisoners, a hot-button issue following the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal. And they have suffered plenty of casualties, including the very public deaths at the hands of a mob in Fallujah.

In Afghanistan, even the security of the country's president was entrusted to DynCorp International, through a State Department contract. That catapulted heavily armed Americans into the spotlight alongside the country's new leader.

It is high-profile and often dangerous work, frequently employing former soldiers for jobs the military is otherwise too busy or does not have the expertise to perform.

"Around the world in dangerous situations, when there is a need for protection of diplomats or facilities or activities and people connected with the U.S. government, we routinely hire contractors to provide that security," Adam Ereli, a State Department spokesman, told reporters last month.

His comments came shortly after six contractors from Blackwater, a privately-held firm, were killed in Iraq when their chartered helicopter was shot down.

Price asserted that the legislation isn't meant to limit use of private security firms. "This isn't an anti-contracting bill," he said.

Industry officials have said they're interested in crafting rules that would help ensure high professional standards by weeding out unqualified contractors and, in the process, reduce casualties.

To that end, Price said he worked with security firms on the new legislation and hopes that it will

be incorporated into the defense authorization bill this year.

"We support all the transparency and accountability bits that are in the bill," said Doug Brooks, head of the International Peace Operations Association, which counts firms like L-3 Communications' (LLC: news, chart, profile) MPRI, Blackwater and ArmorGroup International PLC (UK:AMR: news, chart, profile) among its members.

The organization has its own guidelines that members adhere to covering ethics, insurance, human rights, transparency and accountability, among other areas.

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