

Pentagon Allows “Near Slavery” Conditions Among Foreign Workers in Iraq and Afghanistan

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Many of the 70,000 “third country national”(TCN) service workers employed in Afghanistan and Iraq “recount having been robbed of wages, injured without compensation, subjected to sexual assault, and held in conditions resembling indentured servitude by their subcontractor bosses,” reports Sarah Stillman in a June 6th article in The New Yorker magazine titled “The Invisible Army.” In fact, the system resembles nothing so much as a twisted form of modern slavery.

“These workers, primarily from South Asia and Africa, often live in barbed-wire compounds on U.S. bases, (and) eat at meagre chow halls...” she reports. “A large number are employed by fly-by-night subcontractors who are financed by the American taxpayer but who often operate outside the law.”

Since the U.S. invasions, more than 2,000 contractor fatalities and 51,000 contractor injuries have been reported in Iraq and Afghanistan as the soaring casualty rates “are now on a par with those of U.S. troops in both war zones,” Stillman writes.

Although President Obama said in 2009 he would make good on his campaign pledge to do better by these contractors, the number of TCN’s in Afghanistan had increased by nearly 50 percent reaching 17,500—with no apparent improvement in their lot. Indeed, the deplorable conditions on the bases where contractors are employed have triggered widespread rioting.

“Previously unreported worker riots have erupted on U.S. bases over issues such as lack of food and unpaid wages,” Stillman reports. On May 1, 2010, in a labor camp run by Prime Projects International on the largest military base in Baghdad, more than a thousand subcontractors—primarily Indians and Nepalis—rampaged using as weapons fists, stones, wooden bats, and, as one U.S. military policeman put it, “anything they could find.”

“Employees started to throw gravel at the managers. Four-foot pieces of plywood crashed through glass windows. Workers broke down the door to the food cellar and made off with as much as they could carry,” the reporter noted. Several weeks later, workers in a nearby camp run by subcontractor Gulf Catering Co. staged a copycat riot, “pelting their bosses with stones and accusing the company of failing to pay them proper wages,” Stillman added.

A manager in another camp operated by a K.B.R. (the former Halliburton subsidiary), told Stillman about conditions that triggered one riot. Ziad Al Karawi described how a thousand Indian and Sri Lankan men under his supervision slept on crowded floors: "Rats and flies attacked us...We had no beds to sleep at or tables to eat at....No communication, no TV, no soap to wash or bathe, no visits from anyone from the company or K.B.R....The workers had no choice except going out in a protest."

K.B.R. claims that it's "business ethics and values" require employees and subcontractors are treated "with dignity and respect," Stillman writes but even after its investigation of conditions "little seems to change." And a spokesman for the U.S. Army Central Command conceded that it "does not play a formal role in the monitoring of living conditions on U.S. bases."

Many of the T.C.N.'s are hired by private employment subcontractors who promise them high wages but pay only a fraction of what they promised. T.C.N.'s are also lied to even about where they will be employed. Some are told they will be working in luxurious Dubai only to find themselves in Iraq under incoming fire.

Stillman reports that "military privatization (of jobs) has produced convoluted chains of foreign subcontracts that often lead to cost overruns and fraud. The Commission on Wartime Contracting recently warned of the dangers associated with "poorly conceived, poorly structured, poorly conducted, and poorly monitored subcontracting," particularly noting the military's "heavy reliance on foreign subcontractors who may not be accountable to any American governmental authority."

The racket begins when the Pentagon outsources prime logistics contracts, worth as much as \$15 billion a year, to such private military firms as K.B.R., DynCorp International, and Fluor. Stillman writes, "These 'prime vendors' then shop out the bulk of their contracts to hundreds of global subcontractors, many based in Middle Eastern countries that are on the U.S. State Department's human-trafficking non-compliance list. Finally, these firms call upon thousands of Third World 'manpower agencies'—small recruiting operations..."

The recruiters, who charge the job-seekers at least a thousand dollars and often more for the privilege of signing up, put them to work on military bases as cooks, cleaners, construction workers, fast-food clerks, electricians, and beauticians, etc. Kenyans truck frozen steaks and inflatable tents, Bosnians repair electrical grids, and Indians provide iced mocha lattes, Stillman writes.

Stillman, who interviewed hundreds of TCNs in the process of preparing her article, said a typical story was that of a 25-year-old Taco Bell employee on a major U.S. base in Iraq who paid a Nepal recruiter \$4,000 to get a job in Iraq where he was told he would make his investment back quickly. In May, 2009, the man found himself housed in a shipping container behind the U.S. Embassy in the Green Zone where he slept on a soiled mattress with 25 other migrants. "Many learned that they were to earn as little as \$275 a month as cooks and servers for U.S. soldiers—a fraction of what they'd been promised, and a tiny sliver of what U.S. taxpayers are billed for their labor."

In case you think the investigative reporter's findings are sensationalized, read the findings of the Pentagon's own 2006 investigation into subcontractor working conditions. Government inspectors listed "widespread" abuses, including the illegal confiscation of workers' passports, "deceptive hiring practices," "excessive recruiting fees" and "substandard worker living conditions." In short, another tragic example of how a greed-driven totalitarian state has no regard for the individual. Although President Lincoln abolished slavery in 1863, it appears the Pentagon has reinstituted the practice for its own ends.#

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