

# Private US military contractors move into Afghanistan

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Private US military contractors move into Helmand

British forces fear influx of Americans may harm 'hearts and minds' campaign after Blackwater shootings in Iraq

By Kim Sengupta in Kabul

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The Independent. Large numbers of US private military personnel are expected to arrive in Helmand, the focal point of British involvement in Afghanistan, as part of a new effort to promote reconstruction and development in the war-torn province.

The US has contributed the largest sum to the new aid effort, over \$200m. But British officials striving to win "hearts and minds" in the conflict against the Taliban have expressed concern over the potential influx of military contractors, amid a continuing furore over the shooting of civilians in Iraq by Blackwater.

As Nato troops reclaim territory from the Taliban, the movement has increasingly resorted to suicide attacks and roadside bombings. "The worry is that there will be a blast, and some contractors will panic and open fire, as happened with Blackwater in Baghdad. That is the very last thing that Helmand needs at the moment," said a Western diplomat.

"On paper the Americans are by far the largest donors in the province, but a big portion of that never filters down to the ground." A recent meeting of donors decided that the security situation in Helmand was now stable enough to start bigger aid projects. But there are recurring complaints, including among some USAID workers, that a substantial proportion of American aid money is siphoned off for security. The US government spends, on average, just over \$1m a year to protect each aid worker it sends to Afghanistan.

DynCorp, one of the main American security companies, has already sown resentment in Helmand with its participation in the campaign to eradicate the opium poppy crop. British commanders accept that farmers whose livelihoods have been destroyed do not distinguish between private contractors and soldiers, despite repeated assurances that British troops are not involved. The government of President Hamid Karzai, like its counterpart in Iraq, has expressed concern about the activities of private contractors and is discussing new legislation to tighten control.

Blackwater provides security for the US embassy in Kabul, but the largest American government contract in the country is believed to be held by Texas-based USPI. According to reports in its home state last week, the company has been accused of overbilling the US government by millions of dollars for non-existent employees and vehicles. USPI acknowledges that it is being investigated, but insists that the allegations are untrue.

USPI's hiring practices in Afghanistan have drawn criticism from the International Crisis Group, a think tank. It said in a report that a majority of the men on USPI's payroll were associated with private militias. "Many have used their authority to engage in criminal activity, including drug trafficking," it claimed.

An American supervisor working for USPI was accused of shooting dead an Afghan interpreter and is said to have been flown out of the country the next day. Officials from Blackwater later took part in a raid on its offices in which computers and files were removed.

USPI has been the target of several bomb attacks. Its headquarters in Kandahar was hit by a suicide bomb, and another suicide bomber targeting a convoy being escorted by the company's personnel killed 15 people and injured 26.

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