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The Nation

Obama Administration Keeping Blackwater Armed and Dangerous in Afghanistan

By Jeremy Scahill

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Blackwater is up for sale and its shadowy owner, Erik Prince, is rumored to be planning to move to the United Arab Emirates as his top deputies face indictment for a range of alleged crimes, yet the company remains a central part of President Obama's Afghanistan war. Now, Blackwater's role is expanding.

On Friday, the US State Department awarded Blackwater another "diplomatic security" contract to protect US officials in Afghanistan. CBS News reports that the \$120 million deal is for "protective services" at the US consulates in Herat and Mazar-e-Sharif. Blackwater has another security contract in Afghanistan worth \$200 million and trains Afghan forces. The company also works for the CIA and the US military and provides bodyguards for US Ambassador Karl Eikenberry as well as US lawmakers and other officials who visit the country. The company has four forward operating bases in Afghanistan and Prince has boasted that Blackwater's counter-narcotics forces have called in NATO airstrikes.

The new security contract was awarded to one of Blackwater's alter egos, the United States Training Center, despite the indictments of five senior company officials on bribery, weapons and conspiracy charges. Its operatives in both Afghanistan and Iraq have been indicted for killing innocent civilians. The Senate Armed Services Committee has called on the Justice Department to investigate Blackwater's use of a shell company,

Paravant, to win training contracts in Afghanistan. Despite these and numerous other scandals, the State Department once again awarded the company a lucrative contract.

"Under federal acquisition regulations, the prosecution of the specific Blackwater individuals does not preclude the company or its successive companies and subsidiaries from bidding on contracts," a State Department spokesperson told CBS. "On the basis of full and open competition, the department performed a full technical evaluation of all proposals and determined the US Training Center has the best ability and qualifications to meet the contract requirements."

Representative Jan Schakowsky, who chairs the Intelligence Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, immediately blasted the State Department's awarding of the contract to Blackwater. "This is a company whose cowboy-like behavior has not only resulted in civilian deaths; it has also jeopardized our mission and the safety of U.S. troops and diplomatic personnel worldwide. Instead of punishing Blackwater for its extensive history of serious abuses the State Department is rewarding the company with up to \$120 million in taxpayer funds," Schakowsky said. "I strongly believe that the former Blackwater should not be receiving further U.S. contracts, and I have repeatedly urged the U.S. government to no longer do business with this company. Though the name Blackwater has become synonymous with the worst of contractor abuses, the bigger problem is our dangerous reliance on such companies for the business of waging war."

Earlier this year, Schakowsky and Senator Bernie Sanders reintroduced the Stop Outsourcing Security Act, which would phase out the use of private security contractors by the government. Ironically, Hillary Clinton was a co-sponsor of the legislation when she was a senator and running for president. Now, as Secretary of State, she is the US official in charge of most Blackwater contracts. Blackwater is also bidding on a contract potentially worth up to \$1 billion to train the Afghan National Police.