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Global Research

Undercounting deaths of US soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan

Contractor deaths are rarely reported

By Bernd Debusmann

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By most counts, the death toll of U.S. soldiers in America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan stood at 5,157 in the second week of September. Add at least 1,360 private contractors working for the U.S. and the number tops 6,500.



Contractor deaths and injuries (around 30,000 so far) are rarely reported but they highlight the United States' steadily growing dependence on private enterprise.

It's a dependence some say has slid into incurable addiction. Contractor ranks in Iraq and Afghanistan have swollen to just under a quarter million. They outnumber U.S. troops in Afghanistan and they almost match uniformed soldiers in Iraq.

The present ratio of about one contractor for every uniformed member of the U.S. armed forces is more than double that of every other major conflict in American history, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

That means the world's only superpower cannot fight its war nor protect its civilian officials, diplomats and embassies without support from contractors.

"As the military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have progressed, the military services, defense agencies and other stakeholder agencies...continue to increase their reliance on contractors. Contractors are now literally in the center of the battlefield in unprecedented numbers," according to a report to Congress by the bipartisan Commission on Wartime Contracting in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"In previous wars, the military police protected bases and the battle space as other military service members engaged and pursued the enemy," said the report.

In listing the 1,360-plus contractor casualties, it said that criticism of the present system and suggestions for reforming it "in no way diminish their sacrifices."

So why are they not routinely added to military casualty counts? And why should they? A full accounting for total casualties is important because both Congress and the public tend to gauge a war's success or failure by the size of the force deployed and the number of killed and wounded, according to George Washington university scholar Steven Schooner.

In other words: the higher the casualty number, the more difficult it is for political and military leaders to convince a skeptical public that a war is worth fighting, particularly a war that promises to be long, such as the conflict in Afghanistan. Polls show that a majority of Americans already think the Afghan war is not worth fighting.

Figures on deaths and injuries among the vast ranks of civilians in war zones are tracked by the U.S. Department of Labor on the basis of claims under an insurance policy, the Defense Base Act, which all U.S. contracting companies and subcontractors must take out for the civilians they employ outside the United States.

EXPENDABLE PROFITEERS, ROGUES?

The Labor Department compiles the statistics on a quarterly basis but only releases them in response to requests under the Freedom of Information Act. This can take weeks. The Department gives no details of the nationalities of the contractors, saying that doing so would "constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy" under the U.S. Privacy Act.

Writing in last autumn's *Parameters*, the quarterly journal of the U.S. Army War College, Schooner said that an accurate tally was critical to any discussion of the costs and benefits of the military's efforts in the wars. What's more, the American public needs to know that their government is delegating to the private sector "the responsibility to stand in harm's way and, if required, die for America."

Schooner wrote it was troubling that few Americans considered the deaths of contractors relevant or significant even though many of them performed roles carried out by uniformed military only a generation ago. "Many...concede that they perceive contractor personnel as expendable profiteers, adventure seekers, cowboys, or rogue elements not entitled to the same respect or value due to the military."

That's not surprising after a series of ugly incidents involving armed security contractors. They make up for a small proportion of the total (about 8 percent) but account for almost all the headlines that have deepened negative perceptions and prompted labels from mercenary and merchant of death to "the coalition of the billing."

In the most notorious incident, two years ago, employees of the company then known as Blackwater opened fire in a crowded Baghdad square, killing 17 Iraqis. Five of the Blackwater shooters, who were working for the Department of State, have been indicted on manslaughter and weapons charges.

The Pentagon describes private contractors as a "force multiplier" because they let soldiers concentrate on military missions. Some of the actions of private security contractors could be termed a "perception multiplier." Such as the after-hours antics of contractors from the company ArmorGroup North America guarding the U.S. embassy in Kabul.

Shaking off the image of rogues became even more difficult for private security contractors after a Washington-based watchdog group, the Project on Government Oversight, accompanied a detailed report on misconduct and morale problems among the guard force with photographs showing nearly nude, drunken employees in a variety of obscene poses and fondling each other.

Whether contractors, even rogue elements and cowboys, should not be counted in the toll of American wars is another matter. Doing so would be part of the transparency Barack Obama promised when he ran for president.