

Civilian Contractors Pay Price in Iraq

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By Sue Fleming

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Since last March, more than 680 U.S. soldiers have died in Iraq but no one is keeping track of the number of dead among the tens of thousands of civilian contractors working alongside the military.

Neither the Pentagon nor the State Department keeps a tally of contractors killed and firms are reluctant to release figures for fear of becoming targets, but a conservative estimate is about 50 civilian contractors have died so far.

"We do not track civilian contractor deaths. We leave that up to companies," said military spokesman Lt. Col. Joe Yoswa.

A State Department office tracks U.S. civilian deaths but for security reasons no details or figures were released, said Stuart Patt, the spokesman for consular affairs.

Known deaths so far include 30 employees and subcontractors working for Texas-based Kellogg Brown and Root, the U.S. military's main logistics contractor in Iraq, and 13 civilians working for San Diego company Titan Corp, which does translation work for the Army in Iraq.

Private security contractors, who have been thrust into greater combat roles as attacks have increased, have also paid a price. Four employees from security firm Blackwater were killed last month.

"There are very few countries that are so hostile, where you constantly run the risk of being surrounded by people with weapons and RPGs (rocket-propelled grenades)," said one security contractor, who asked not to be named.

"Iraq really is a very hostile environment. It raises the question whether ... private companies should be operating there," he said.

KEY ROLE IN CONFLICT

Steven Schooner, a government procurement specialist from George Washington University, said he was dismayed by the failure to officially acknowledge the deaths of contractors.

"It's a little bit ugly if our elected politicians have decided that the country's tolerance can be sustained longer by serving up contractors to take bullets," said Schooner.

Contractors have long played an important role in conflict zones and supported U.S. troops in Vietnam, in the last Gulf War and now in Iraq. But what is different this time, say experts, is the scope of work and the dangers.

At the end of the Gulf War the ratio was about one contractor to 100 soldiers, but this time around it is one contractor to every 10 soldiers, estimated Peter Singer, author of a book on the privatization of military jobs.

"We are in a battle zone now and we have contractors fighting," said Singer.

Moral and ethical issues surrounding the use of contractors in a battlefield have been an issue for decades in the military. One official said discussions were already beginning over what the government's responsibility should be this time.

For example, what should the moral and ethical role of the government be if a contractor is taken hostage, or killed while working alongside a soldier with the U.S. military.

"What is the difference between a Thomas Hamill and a Jessica Lynch?," asked Singer, referring to a KBR trucker taken hostage in an ambush in Iraq last Friday, and a young army private taken prisoner in Iraq who was later rescued.

"Both were in convoys that came under attack," said Singer. "The only difference is one is a contractor and the other a soldier."

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