

Lawmaker Wants Contractor Details

Bill Would Force Report of Civilian Deaths, Injuries in Iraq, Afghanistan

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WASHINGTON, DC - An Illinois Democrat is introducing legislation aimed at forcing the Bush administration to provide details about the civilian contractors working in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Rep. Jan Schakowsky, a member of the House Select Committee on Intelligence, is championing a bill that would require the administration to tell lawmakers how many contractors are employed in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as how many have been killed and wounded in those conflicts.

"Contractors have operated under a veil of secrecy, without a public debate about the nature and scope of their operations," Schakowsky said in a prepared statement.

"This legislation will shed light on the war business, so that Congress and the American people can determine when and where the outsourcing of our security to private firms is warranted."

The bill also would require the administration to tell lawmakers what host country, international or U.S. laws contractors may have broken, as well as any disciplinary actions taken.

As of late Tuesday, 19 Democrats, including Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee of Houston, had signed on as co-sponsors.

Officials at the White House and the Pentagon declined to comment on the bill.

An estimated 100,000 civilian contractors are working in Iraq alone, providing a vast array of services, from serving up meals to rescuing embassy convoys that have come under fire.

The Pentagon is conducting its first survey to obtain more precise information about contractors working in Iraq.

KBR is largest

Houston-based Halliburton Co.'s subsidiary KBR is the largest contractor in Iraq.

KBR has more than 50,000 employees and subcontractors deployed to Iraq, Kuwait and Afghanistan. Company officials do not break out the numbers by country.

The Pentagon has never tracked contractor casualties in Iraq or Afghanistan, citing military regulations.

The Defense Department "mourns the loss of contractors, as it does our service members," Defense Department spokeswoman Cynthia Smith said Tuesday.

"There are privacy rights related to casualty notification information, and the companies are committed to providing this information to their employees' families," Smith said.

A little-known branch

The task of tracking contractor casualties has been left to a little-known branch of the Labor Department, the Division of Longshore and Harbor Workers' Compensation, which keeps statistics on workers' compensation claims.

The Labor Department says at least 770 civilian contractors working for U.S. firms in Iraq had died as of Dec. 31, while 7,761 had been injured.

But the Labor Department figures don't tell the full story.

KBR has had 98 employees and subcontractors killed in Iraq, Kuwait and Afghanistan. But a breakdown of contractor casualties provided by the Labor Department identified no fatalities as KBR deaths.

On Friday, senior leaders from the Army Sustainment Command will be in Houston to award the Defense Secretary's Medal for the Defense of Freedom to the families of nine KBR workers who have died in the Middle East, company and Army officials said. Also, 19 workers who were wounded will receive Defense of Freedom medals.

To date, the Defense Department has agreed to confer the Defense of Freedom medal on 95 KBR personnel for their work in the Middle East, company officials said.

Military outsourcing

Today, the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee will hold a hearing on the Pentagon's reliance on military contractors for the war effort in Iraq.

George Seagle, director of security for KBR's government and infrastructure division, is scheduled to testify.

The committee had hoped KBR Chief Executive Officer Bill Utt would appear, but company officials opted to send Seagle instead.

"Because the committee indicated that the hearing would focus on security, KBR determined that the director of security for its Government and Infrastructure Division who was based in the Middle East for nearly three years was the most appropriate person to appear," company spokeswoman Melissa Norcross said.