

**Contractor Deaths Nearing 800;**

**Toll Has Surged in Past Months, But Civilians Still Line Up For The Jobs**

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Laboring in a war with no discernible front line, more than 770 civilian contractors have died in Iraq since the U.S.-led invasion began in March 2003.

Statistics kept by the Labor Department indicate fatalities among civilian contractors working for American firms escalated rapidly late last year, with at least 301 dying in Iraq in 2006 - including 124 in the final three months.

U.S. military deaths totaled 818 during the year, the Defense Department has reported.

Despite the danger, job seekers continue to flood contractors' offices with rsums.

Some 165,000 prospective employees contacted Houston-based Halliburton Co.'s KBR last year about job opportunities in Iraq, Kuwait and Afghanistan, company officials said. KBR now has half a million rsums on file.

And the recent troop "surge" announced by President Bush has prompted KBR to increase its hiring, company Chief Executive Officer Bill Utt said Friday.

Among the job seekers crowding into a recent KBR orientation program at Greenspoint Mall, many of the job seekers crowding into a recent KBR orientation program at Greenspoint Mall were fatalistic about the risks.

"When it comes your time, it comes your time," said Robert Hulion, 59, of Crestview, Fla.,

before being deployed to Iraq to work as a fumigation specialist.

"I've been through Vietnam, and I've been to New York City. But what I call dangerous is Mardi Gras in New Orleans," Hulion joked.

Hulion has joined what the Pentagon estimates to be 100,000 civilians working for U.S.-based contractors in Iraq.

Supplementing the 130,000 American troops serving in the country, these civilians provide a wide variety of functions, including serving up chow and interrogating prisoners.

The 100,000 figure is an estimate because, nearly four years into the war, the Pentagon is just now conducting its first survey to determine how many civilian contractors are working in Iraq.

And Pentagon officials, citing military regulations, don't track contractor deaths.

### Contract worth billions

Halliburton's KBR is the largest military contractor operating in Iraq, with more than 50,000 employees and subcontractors working there, as well as in Kuwait and Afghanistan.

Working under a multibillion-dollar contract with the Army, KBR crews drive trucks, wash clothes, deliver mail and provide a host of other support services for U.S. troops.

KBR's workers are a critical component of the Pentagon's privatization strategy, enabling the military to reduce the number of troops needed in the country by turning over noncombat functions to civilians.

The idea behind the privatization plan was to keep these noncombatants away from the fighting. But that has proved impossible in violence-riddled Iraq.

"The whole place is a front line," said Peter Singer, a senior fellow at the Washington-based Brookings Institution and author of *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry*

The contractor death toll rose last week when five Americans working for Blackwater USA were killed in Baghdad after their helicopter was shot down by insurgents. The contractors were rushing to help a U.S. Embassy convoy that had come under attack.

Civilian contractors killed in Iraq are often eligible - and many have received - the defense secretary's Medal for the Defense of Freedom, the so-called Purple Heart for civilians working on behalf of the military.

But their names are left off the Pentagon's Iraq casualty rolls.

If they were counted, the U.S. military's official casualty figures - 3,063 as of Friday - would be 25 percent higher.

"Since Day 1, the administration has been very, very comfortable artificially deflating the human cost of our effort in Iraq," said Steven Schooner, co-director of the government-procurement law program at George Washington University Law School.

The Pentagon's failure to report contractor deaths angers some family members whose loved ones died working in Iraq.

"There are so many of them who have been killed, and they're not acknowledged," noted Hollie Hulett, whose husband, Stephen, a truck driver, was killed when his convoy was ambushed in April 2004. "They're swept under the rug."

### **Tracking casualties**

The 770 tally - representing fatalities (including deaths by natural causes) between March 2003 and Dec. 31, 2006 - was tabulated by the Labor Department's Division of Longshore and Harbor Workers' Compensation.

Last year's contractor fatalities represent 39 percent of the deaths reported by the Labor Department.

Besides those killed, another 7,761 civilian contractors had been injured in Iraq as of Dec. 31, the Labor Department said.

The Labor Department has these numbers because it tracks workers' compensation claims by injured workers or families of slain contractors under the federal Defense Base Act.

"Using employee time lost is a kind of a weird way to track casualties," Singer noted. "But it's part of the bizarre nature of this industry and the way it's been used in Iraq."

Still, the Labor Department figures don't tell the full story.

KBR, for instance, says 95 of its employees and subcontractors have been killed in Iraq, Kuwait and Afghanistan. Company officials declined to say exactly how many have died in Iraq alone.

The Labor Department provided the Houston Chronicle a breakdown of fatalities and injuries by contractor, through the end of December, but this list does not identify any deaths as KBR fatalities.

The database has many - often intentional - holes. The Labor Department, for instance, won't specify an employer if that contractor has fewer than seven cases in a particular category, a department spokesman said via e-mail.

### **Contractor injuries**

Aside from the deaths, KBR officials say 430 workers and subcontractors had been injured because of hostile action in Iraq, Kuwait and Afghanistan.

In terms of fatalities, however, KBR reported a decline in 2006. The company and its subcontractors suffered 17 fatalities last year, compared with 41 in 2004.

KBR officials would not discuss why their fatalities dropped last year.

"To avoid jeopardizing the safety and security of our employees and subcontractors, we will not detail the specific measures that are currently in place," company spokeswoman Melissa Norcross said.

The Labor Department records indicate L-3 Services Group, which provides translators and interpreters for the Army, had suffered the worst casualties in Iraq: 241 workers killed by the end of 2006, including 32 in the last three months of the year.

The actual number of L-3 Services Group fatalities in Iraq, noted Rick Kiernan, the company's vice president for strategic communications, was 255 as of Dec. 31 and 261 as of Friday.

Many of those victims were Iraqis, known to be working with Americans and then assassinated while off duty, Kiernan said.

The spate of contractor deaths suffered by L-3 Services during the fourth quarter, Kiernan said, could reflect the timing of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, when many of the workers returned home for the holiday.

The U.S. arm of Britain's ArmorGroup International, a private security firm, has seen 22 workers die in Iraq, the Labor records show.

Company spokesman Patrick Toyne Sewell declined to confirm those figures, noting: "If you focus on the numbers, you start to consider people as numbers, rather than as much-missed friends or colleagues."

"We aim to prevent any (casualties) at all," Toyne Sewell said.

In their discussions about Iraq, military experts had been assuming contractor casualties would account for, perhaps, 10 percent of the total U.S.-related fatalities.

If the Labor Department figures are correct, contractors accounted for 27 percent of all U.S.-related fatalities last year.

"The question is: Is this better data, or is the rate going up at a frightening pace?" Schooner said.

Of the 770 victims, only 144 have been certified as having died as a direct result of enemy action, a Labor Department spokesman said.

Why that figure would be so low - fewer than one in five fatalities - is not completely clear. But L-3 Services' Kiernan noted that the assassinations of off-duty workers, for example, would not be counted as combat deaths.

How many of these civilian-contractor casualties were American citizens is unknown. Labor officials say they cannot provide a breakdown by nationality.

### Splitting the contract

Despite the new hiring, KBR's activity in Iraq has declined since a peak set back in 2004, although the company still performed \$4.8 billion worth of work last year, including \$1.2 billion in the fourth quarter, the company's figures show.

The Army has decided to split up KBR's huge logistics contract among three companies. But KBR still has plenty of work to do.

In fact, KBR has 1,000 positions to fill in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The applicants funnel through an old Montgomery Ward store at Greenspoint. KBR processes as many as 900 job applicants a week.

In 22 training sessions, instructors cover everything from the dangerous spiders workers might encounter in the Middle East to how to behave if kidnapped.

For Trish Anderson of West Palm Beach, Fla., a one-year tour with KBR represents a way to receive some financial freedom.

"I want to buy a few more pieces of property, and I have a daughter who's ... going to college," Anderson said.

Like many applicants, Anderson also sees a bigger mission - "to be able to give the gift of freedom."

This 38-year-old former Marine Corps staffer and a veteran of both the Persian Gulf War and the Iraq war says she is not going into this blindly.

"I know what the dangers and the stress and the risks are," she said. "Honestly, I don't think it's getting worse. I think it's getting better."

Still, all the uncertainty about the actual level of danger and fatalities appalls critics.

"Should we have to estimate this matter, or should we know it as fact?" asked T. Scott Allen, a Houston attorney representing the Hulett family as well as other families of slain KBR workers and injured employees in a lawsuit against the company.

Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-Ill., has introduced legislation that would force the administration to report to Congress about civilian casualties.

"I think people have lost patience with this war without calculating in the other 770 people who have died.

"Imagine," Schakowsky said, what the public reaction would be if the reported casualty figures "were now closer to 4,000 people who have died?"